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Birds in Tiny Cages

The youngest of four devoted sisters, Flora is lonely when ill health forces her and her husband Leo into exile in Barcelona. Her life in their stuffy 'ático' flat is dominated by the window and the happenings on the rooftops around it: children playing amongst women hanging up perpetual laundry; old ladies asleep in rocking chairs, hens in boxes, cats, potted plants and birds in tiny cages.

Flora is delighted when she meets the English painter who shares a studio opposite their apartment, and she is amused by his sculptor-friend Parker, whose bright blue eyes and high complexion remind her of a toy sailor. She feels something at once repellent and attractive in his manner, and is surprised to find herself agreeing to visit his studio.

BOOKS BY
BARBARA COMYNS

FICTION

Sisters by a River
Our Spoons Came from Woolworths
Who was Changed and Who was Dead
The Vet's Daughter
The Skin Chairs
Birds in Tiny Cages

NON-FICTION

Out of the Red, Into the Blue

Birds in Tiny Cages

BARBARA COMYNS



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William Heinemann Ltd
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All the English characters in this book are entirely
imaginary.

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ONE

EVERY MORNING PINK and blue pigeons were perched on the parapet of the building with "20th Century Fox" written on it. They waited until an old woman called to them as she scattered stale bread on an opposite roof; then one by one they fluttered across the street. Flora Elliot would watch them from her kitchen window while the breakfast toast burnt. As she lived in an eighth-floor flat, her rather lonely and aimless life was dominated by roofs and windows. Fortunately the roofs were Spanish and consequently extremely busy, with women hanging out their perpetual laundry, children riding scooters and tricycles, barking dogs, mattress-making, old ladies sleeping in rocking chairs, cars being sprayed, carpets being cleaned, boys sparring, roof gardens, hens in boxes, cats, and birds in tiny cages. The windows only became interesting at night when the shutters and grass blinds were rolled away and exposed rooms with everlasting meals in progress under heavy and elaborate centre lights; brown men wearing bleached white vests and their mothers, sisters and wives fluttering round them; short-sighted girls bent over their sewing; bent old women spooning up food from steaming bowls; a man wearing green-striped pyjamas making a lavatory seat; young 'novios' sitting hand in hand; a small art class in progress and always women ironing. Then there was the ever-changing sky, sometimes rather obscured by a silvery smoke-haze, but often pure El Greco; and there were

thunderstorms, when it seemed as if the lightning would come right into the flat. In the distance were steep, dark hills decorated by the silhouettes of buildings which could have been palaces and castles—and at night they were embroidered with necklaces of light.

Flora and her husband Leo had been living in this 'ático' flat in Barcelona for nearly three months. Leo was trying to add to their small private income by teaching English, which resulted in Flora being alone for the greater part of the day. At first it seemed as if no one, with the exception of a solitary Frenchman, required English lessons; then suddenly the schools opened and Leo had a choice of engagements. His Spanish, although not completely fluent, was precise, and his appearance, with his high-bridged nose and long thin body dressed in beautifully cut English suits, was an asset to any school that boasted that its professors were 'nativos'. Morning classes from nine until one, then luncheon, and perhaps a short walk if there were no lessons to be given to private pupils, then classes again from seven until ten in the evening. Sunday was free and Leo was able to read, his favourite occupation. Flora liked to read, but for entertainment, seldom for information. She liked to swim and lie in the sun perhaps more than anything. She was interested in people, but shy and lacking in self-confidence, only really at ease in her own home, which unconsciously she would build into a sort of frame for herself. This she was unable to do in the flat because the furniture belonged to the landlord and she dared not interfere with the walls, which were painted a depressing green, like an Edwardian billiard-room. The furniture included chairs upholstered in black chintz with tired roses climbing about it, fairly comfortable for Spain, but quite hideous. Unlike most Barcelona flats, theirs had no balcony. There was a small window-ledge, which just took five sad and wind-swept geraniums, and then at the constant risk of a pot falling

onto the balcony below and injuring the two little girls and baby boy who frequently played there. In spite of its drabness the flat was convenient and the small rooms had pleasing shapes and the floors were covered with pink tiles. To save money Flora did all the housework, washing and ironing herself, rather to the surprise of the professional washerwomen who haunted the roof, where there were broken down wash-houses and clothes lines and incidentally a beautiful view of the sea and surrounding hills.

The flat was situated in a middle-class block, the building grimy and dreary in the extreme on the outside. The street was one of those streets that start well and end well, but go to pieces in the middle. The neighbourhood appeared to be the home of various film companies and mattress-making establishments. The near-by shops were small and friendly and Flora enjoyed shopping and practising her Spanish, which was poor. It consisted of a number of nouns and adjectives, but very few verbs, and she found it impossible to keep up a conversation—she could just manage to keep going for a three-floor journey in the lift with the other tenants. Occasionally she tried to sunbathe on the roof, but the presence of the washerwomen and men beating up the insides of mattresses was disturbing.

That year there was a great shortage of water in Barcelona and sometimes the flats on the upper floors were without water for several days at a time and the portero would bring up buckets from the basement. If there was a sound of rain falling in the night Flora would wake Leo by exclaiming, "Listen to the rain! We may get a bath tomorrow."

Although it grew dark soon after seven in the evening the days were summery. Glowing dark girls walked on the pavements in their fresh white dresses, the leaves were still on the trees and the sun was strong. Flowers bloomed in municipal flower beds, on roofs and balconies, and Flora thought,

'If only I had a garden I wouldn't be so bored.' Sometimes when she was alone in the flat boredom seemed to be coming up at her through the cracks between the pink tiles, wave upon wave of stifling boredom. She would sigh: 'If I was allowed to paint the flat different colours or take down the landlord's frightful pictures, or if we could afford a wireless, it would make some difference.' Then she would return to her window-gazing to see if anything had changed. The two cats that spent their days curled up together on the corner of a low red roof were still there; the feather-like creeper that disguised an iron fence was reaching round them. 'Perhaps one day they will become entangled in it and be unable to move when it becomes dark,' she thought. She would listen to the noise, like the rattle of castanets, which she now knew was made by the mattress-makers, and searching the roofs she would see the white wool being beaten by sticks and flying in the air. Sometimes a sunburnt young man wearing bathing slips would appear with a bundle of things that resembled small pink hams, but were as light as feathers. He would hang them on an iron bar built out to support a large chimney, and there they would stay for several hours, swaying gently. A small boy wearing a space helmet would attack imaginary foes with a silver-painted wooden sword. The young men in the attic art school often sat on their window-sill, dark against their white shirts; some of them smoked pipes and looked quite English, she noticed.

When Leo and Flora first arrived in Barcelona, filled with hope and fortified by two hundred pounds in travellers' cheques, they stayed in a small hotel in a back street off the Ramblas that had been recommended to them. They had only visited Spain on one previous occasion, when they had spent a few hours in Barcelona waiting for a boat to take them to Palma. Their recollection of Barcelona was very vague—a silvery city with fountains playing. Leo, who had travelled

more than his wife, was amused at Flora's surprise when she saw the black and sunless street where their hotel was situated and Barcelona's often pale and hazy sun. She had expected gleaming white or pink buildings against a sky of violent blue, rustling palm trees and green shutters banging in the wind, as she had seen in Majorca. On the other hand she was enchanted by the twisting old streets round the cathedral, and the antique shops with their beautifully carved cherubs and religious figures, ornate bed-heads and painted chests; by cave-like 'bodegas', and glittering jewellery shops and the bird market in the Ramblas, where they sold savage-looking pigeons, almost as large as domestic hens, and fantastic fantailed ones, some with curling feathers and others a startling yellow—were they dyed and would they disappoint their owners by turning white? The displays of resplendent flowers held her spell-bound and she could hardly bring herself to leave so much beauty. Leo would have to tug gently at her arm and steer her towards wherever they were going.

They ate all their meals in restaurants, which made drastic inroads on their capital. They had been told Spain was the cheapest country in Europe, but they did not find it so. Not knowing their way around Barcelona, they patronized the more expensive restaurants and, although they chose the cheapest food on the menu, their money was disappearing at an alarming rate. Leo concentrated on the advertisements for flats to let in the *Vanguardia*, but soon discovered there was an acute housing shortage and the least they could expect to pay for a furnished flat would be three thousand pesetas a month. In the meantime their linen, silver, books and various personal belongings arrived in crates and had to be stored. Then Leo heard of a flat in a 'torre' that was due to become vacant in a few weeks; at the moment it was occupied by a Hungarian footballer. This sounded hopeful, but the delay would mean eating more expensive restaurant meals and by

this time they were both feeling liverish and longed for home cooking. Suddenly a flat already vacant was offered and Leo returned with such a glowing description of this flat that Flora said, "Take it, take it immediately. I never want to eat another restaurant meal again." So they had a home in Barcelona, and the next problem was to find pupils to pay the rent.

Flora was bitterly disappointed when she first saw the flat. Leo had been over-enthusiastic about the furniture and decorations and this, combined with the state of their livers, resulted in a few hard words. They settled down and Flora learnt to cook an entire meal on one electric ring or to use the coal-burning stove, which was quite efficient when it did not smoke, but caused the kitchen to become unbearably hot and dirty. She became used to storing water in the bath, buying drinking water in large carafes, boiling milk, frying in olive oil and housekeeping in a Spanish way.

Occasionally they would take a train out to some suburb. At first they took taxis, but as they became used to the underground trains they enjoyed using them, often booking to the last station on the line. They would wander round these suburbs, amazed at the size of the houses and gardens. Usually the shutters or curtains were drawn over the windows and the flower-filled gardens were deserted; except for the constant barking of large dogs and the distant rumble of trams it would be strangely still. They tried to walk to the hills, which appeared to be much nearer than they were; but when they eventually reached them it was nearly always a disappointment. To reach open ground they often had to climb a steep bank of dried mud, frequently haunted by shouting boys. When they reached the top it inevitably turned out to be a rubbish dump, and the green which had looked so inviting in the distance was hardly green at all—just dry clay and a few tufts of coarse grass. The tree plantations were often wired off

and hung with notices saying they were privately owned. They usually came across a few sinister old men banging about the grass with sticks, but Flora and Leo never discovered what they were searching for—perhaps snakes or edible snails. Sometimes they would unexpectedly come on a colony of very poor houses and shacks surrounded by bamboos. Children and hens ran in and out of the open doors, the women washing clothes outside in large earthenware bowls, ragged boys standing in groups laughing at the strangers, skinny dogs yelping and barking. Leo would hurry away from the stench of decaying vegetables and other virulent smells, but Flora was fascinated by the large blue morning-glories which blazed away among the filth and the bronze-tufted maize with its fleshy green leaves.

One sultry day while they were still living in the hotel Flora felt brave enough to try one of the enormous bathing establishments down by the port. It was all highly organized, but she was bewildered by the attendants shouting at her in Spanish and depressed by the dirty-looking sea, and crept away without discovering a bathing hut she was allowed to use. Each time she made for one with an open door the bathing attendants cried, "No, arriba!" She climbed up wet, dark staircases, but the women attendants, whom she had come to look on as prison wardresses, still cried "Arriba!" She was afraid they would not let her leave until she had passed through the whole process of undressing, swimming and dressing again and she experienced a wonderful sense of escape when she left the bathing establishment behind and was free to explore the old streets of Barceloneta.

Shortly after they were established in their flat a friend who was passing through Barcelona on his way to England called on them. Finding that he had a surplus of pesetas he asked Flora and Leo to be his guests for the evening and they suggested a visit to a night club. When he inquired which

one they preferred, they exchanged embarrassed glances, not wanting to admit their complete ignorance of Barcelona's night life. Leo eventually surprised his wife by saying 'The Bolero' was quite amusing and within walking distance of the flat. Flora, not to be outdone, admitted that she rather enjoyed an evening at 'The Bolero', although she found the band too loud. She proved right about the band, which, like most bands in Spanish night clubs, was deafening, but the floor show was excellent, consisting of a succession of beautiful girls wearing fabulous costumes and some very good regional dancing. It lasted for almost two hours and the beauty and gaiety of the dancers carried the English party away. In fact Leo was so enthralled that he set fire to his trousers with his lighted cigarette, but this was not discovered until the following morning, when a post-mortem was held on discarded clothing carelessly thrown on the floor when they returned in the early hours.

Leo joined the British Institute, so they were not short of books and Flora was able to pass her lonely evenings reading. She would have liked to spend a few hours a week in the reading-room but was afraid to do this because the subscription was in Leo's name and at that time they did not know that the subscription covered them both. As it was, she had to wait to change her books until Leo was free to accompany her.

Flora struggled with her *Hugo's Spanish Grammar*, but made little progress because she was always finding excuses for not studying. She would sit with the little buff books in front of her, but her eyes wandered round the room, or she would study her hands instead of her books, and decide her nails needed filing, or she would leave the table to search for a pen-knife to sharpen her pencil. Eventually she started a diary so that when Leo inquired how she was progressing with her '*Hugo's*' she was able to say that she hadn't had time that evening because she was busy with her diary. Leo

found her attitude to learning difficult to understand, but as he was a kind and considerate husband, and also very fond of his wife, he did not reproach her. He had been touched by her insistence on doing the entire housework and laundry herself and felt perhaps it was too much to expect her to have time to study as well.

Flora wrote in her diary :

Monday (I have no idea of the date, except that it is September)

Leo (Husband) and I are living in a flat in Barcelona. I did not like it much at first, in fact I was sick the first day, but that may have been the result of eating too many oily meals. The flat is reasonably comfortable for Spain, but two of the rooms have windows that open onto the lift shaft, which is roofed in. When the lift stops outside, the rooms become completely dark as well as airless. I feel lonely and shut in. The bed makes a noise like seagulls crying every time we move. There is a small spy-hole in our front door that makes visitors appear as if they are standing away down a long passage. Our bell seldom rings, but when it does I forget to use it—the spy-hole. It may be called a Judas hole.

Leo has been going round all the schools trying to get work teaching English. At home he worked in a publisher's office until he became ill with a small patch on one of his lungs. It was then that we decided to live in a sunny climate. I was very keen on this and hardly regretted selling our Chelsea house, where we had lived for years, or finding homes for our dog Poker and the Siamese cat. I didn't realize how much I would miss them afterwards. We still have our own furniture which is stored away in the hope that we will be able to bring it here one day. The climate suits Leo and I'm glad about this because it makes

up for all the things we have left behind, including missing my sisters—we used to visit or telephone each other every day. I expect the climate suits me too, but the sky isn't as blue as I expected and there is nowhere for me to sunbathe.

Thursday

I am really writing this diary so that I need not spend so much time on my 'Hugo's'. I think I'm too old to learn—thirty-one. No, this isn't true because Leo is thirty-five and is learning all the time. I find myself cheating when I correct my exercises.

Pretty girls in frilly aprons serve in the butcher's shops. They carve and chop meat all morning. Each fillet of steak is given as much attention as if it were a lace collar they were cutting out, and amazing things are done to chops. I can't look at the things they do to chicken's heads, trimming the beak and comb with scissors and enjoying doing it.

There is a chimney that smokes dreadfully, so we often have to keep our windows closed. I call it Belcher.

Saturday September 28th

Our wedding anniversary. For a special treat we took a taxi up to Tibidabo. We drove up a steep, winding road with a view over Barcelona if we looked down. I had no idea it was so large. The hills above were very impressive. Tibidabo was disappointing, because it was like a city park, with formal gardens, roundabouts, a great modern church that should only be seen from a distance, a giant wheel and a most convincing sort of aeroplane for children. I think there was a flying train as well. All very clean and well organized, rather sweet in a way. The houses had pointed roofs and a sort of alpine air. We kept our taxi waiting while we went for a walk and looked at the view—not as good as one would expect up there. Personally I prefer views where you look up, not down.

Sunday September 29th

This morning we thought it would be nice to buy an anniversary plant. We chose a great ivy, about three feet high. We hope it will grow at least nine feet high, because we saw others growing right up to the ceiling; but they were expensive. Although we did not tell the shop assistant it was an anniversary, she wrapped the pot in silver tinfoil. It looked very charming, but conspicuous and I began to worry about getting it past the portero in the hall. He sits there all day behind a counter, watching. His mother, or perhaps it is his wife, takes over when he has a meal or goes to the lavatory. Often they sit side by side. As soon as we entered the hall with our plant, we felt their four eyes, so brown and calculating, boring through us and the ivy I was trying to conceal.

Almost as soon as we entered the flat, there was a ring at the bell, and of course it was the portero. Fortunately I had time to pull up the shutters, which I had painted blue on the inside; all the same, he darted to the window and kept sticking his tortoise-like head out. He made a fuss about me having plants on the window-sill, and said I was not to water them there in case it injured the building. This is quite dotty because most of the tenants have dripping laundry hanging from every window. Living in this flat is dreadfully suffocating. We are not allowed to bring in any furniture of our own and I'm not even allowed to hang my blue plate on the wall.

Some days are dominated by a certain smell, particularly in Spain. Today it has been a smell of incense. I keep getting puffs of it in the street, and even my face powder, which is over a year old, has suddenly started to smell of it. Yesterday it was dirty dustbins.

Monday September 30th

I think I saw one of the young men from the roof-top studio in the café on the corner. He is tall and looks very English in spite of his beard, or perhaps because of it. If his clothes were more disreputable he would be at home in the King's Road.

I have not spoken to anyone except Leo since I have been here, except for my attempts at Spanish in the lift and shops.

Next door to Belcher there is a tall thin house of at least ten stories. It is extremely dirty and quite isolated. It looks as if the wind howled round it during the winter and I call it Bleak House. The shabby green grass blinds flap across the windows and shabby laundry hangs from every window-sill—just a few rather pitiful garments. There is a grimy pent-house on the roof, and sometimes a wooden shutter opens a little way and a pale male head appears, but never a light. There is a skimpy iron railing round the roof, perhaps to stop skimpy people from falling off, and, on the right, one tall black chimney.

TWO

LEO'S HOURS OF work made it difficult for him to make social contacts. There was a British Club, but it was not functioning at that time because of lack of premises due to the housing shortage. Flora was secretly glad of this, because she would not have cared to visit the club without Leo. She had an imaginary picture of herself in the club sitting under a drooping potted palm, reading an out-of-date *Tatler* and trying to look at home. Suddenly a woman with a pointed nose appearing under a drooping hat would say: "I'm afraid I don't know who you are, but would you care to join in a rubber of bridge?" Flora had never found it necessary to pass the time by playing card games, and now, when, for the first time in her life, she found time heavy on her hands, she could not bring herself to learn. Sometimes she noticed other English residents at the British Institute, and they were usually bent over a periodical, only unbending to take a quick glance at any new arrival who entered the reading-room and hastily wrapping themselves up in paper again. She never had an opportunity to speak to them. Even if she had, she would have been too shy to be the first to speak.

Towards the end of October signs of winter began to appear. There were chestnuts and hot potatoes roasting at street corners; the pretty white dresses were finally discarded. Carpets and matting appeared on many tiled floors, often the only concession towards heating that the Spaniards allowed themselves,

although electric fires were displayed in shop windows, many of them designed to resemble charcoal heaters, others oilstoves, and many of them fantastic, often magenta-coloured. The portero sat behind his counter with his bald head covered by a beret, sometimes shaving his sallow face with an electric razor plugged into the light.

It was still warm enough to sit outside the cafés during the day and Flora sometimes had a coffee in the one on the corner of Balmes, below their block of flats. She liked to watch the people hurrying up and down the steps of the underground station, and the women passing with their shopping baskets, coloured cotton bags, like pillow cases, hanging from their shoulders, filled with long loaves of bread. She noticed that even well-dressed women did not mind being seen carrying blocks of ice if the ice was in a coloured plastic bucket. She was sitting over coffee one morning when her attention was held by a refractory bus which had stopped at the bus stop and now refused to start. The conductor and several passengers pushed it across the busy square, several onlookers joining in, others shouting instructions. On the other side of the square there was a slight incline which helped the engine to start and the bus went on its way, the traffic resuming its constant flow, brightened by the brilliant-yellow taxis. A large golden-brown leaf came floating down towards Flora's table, and quickly lifting her hands towards it she managed to catch it. As she did so she heard someone distinctly say in English: "Oh, good! A happy month!" Looking round she saw one of the bearded young men from the attic studio who, looking slightly embarrassed, muttered "Perdone."

"Er, did you speak English—I mean are you English?" Flora asked eagerly, holding the leaf to her face like a fan.

"Yes, I'm English, but we thought you were Scandinavian because you are so fair. We see you looking out of the window quite a lot."

"I know I do look out of the window rather often," Flora laughed. "But there is nothing else to do most of the time, and I do like to feel the sun. Have you a studio or something up there? I call you the 'Atico Artists' and I had an idea you might be English."

Flora spoke in nervous jerks across the café tables, until the young artist brought his coffee over to her table and sat down beside her. Flora was so happy to be able to speak to someone in English that she forgot her shyness and talked to the young man as if he were an old family friend. He told her his name was John Wyndham and that he ran the studio with a Spanish partner. They specialized in black and white drawings, mostly for advertising; but in the evenings they used the place as a school. "We just about make a living, but we haven't been going very long," he said hopefully. "As soon as we are better established, the girl I'm engaged to marry will come out from England to join us; she's an art student and just finishing her last year at the Royal College. We were there together."

Flora, glancing at her watch, realized it was later than she thought. It was a long time since that had happened; usually it seemed to be much earlier than she hoped. Before she returned to the flat she had agreed to visit the studio the following afternoon with Leo. She felt so light-hearted as she prepared the luncheon that she hardly noticed that the water supply had failed again. As they sat over their pre-luncheon Tio Pepe after Leo returned, she told him about her morning's encounter and begged him to find time to accompany her on this visit to the 'Atico Artists'. "Oh dear, Flora!" he exclaimed impatiently. "Tuesday afternoon. Didn't you remember that I have two private lessons then. It is my heaviest day." Then, seeing her face fall, he added: "Well, if we went round at about five-thirty, I could manage it; but we couldn't stay long, not more than an hour."

"No, no," she said gaily. "That would be heaven. An hour is exactly the sort of time I had in mind."

When she observed a group of young artists sitting on the window-sill later in the evening, she kept well away from her own window because she felt they mustn't see too much of her before the visit. While she waited for Leo, she washed her pale-yellow hair and manicured her damaged and neglected hands. She thought, 'How extraordinary it is that I'm so excited about an hour's visit to an arty young man's studio! The most I can expect from it is to meet other arty young men, most likely years younger than myself. It must be because I have become so starved for social contact and amusement. These long, lonely evenings with only the kitchen stove for company—and the stove often smokes until I cry.'

At five o'clock the next day Flora and Leo entered a block of flats very similar to their own except that the porter appeared to be an elderly woman surrounded by children and a little white dog like Punch's Toby. They were carried to the top floor in an old and sighing lift. When they opened the lift doors the first thing they saw was a door painted bright blue. "That's the studio, I'm sure," Flora cried happily. "Isn't it lovely to hear English voices? Can you hear them, Leo?"

John Wyndham answered their knock, and Flora was pleased to see he really was as charming as she remembered. She glanced at Leo and could see he was agreeably surprised as they followed the young artist across the little hall. He showed them into the studio, a large room facing east, with pieces of drawing paper pinned across part of the window in an attempt to control the light. There were three other men in the room: the Spanish partner, who also wore a beard but was very neatly dressed in a dark suit with too many stripes; the assistant, a wild-looking Irish boy with a thatch of hay-coloured hair hanging over his brow and a ravaged face; and

a middle-aged man who spoke in a strong North-Country accent. The last, with bright eyes and a high complexion, gave the impression of a toy sailor, and his clothes—a fisherman's jersey, jeans and rope-soled canvas shoes—added to the illusion. Actually he was a sculptor who was making a fairly good living and had quite a reputation in Barcelona.

When the introductions were over, tea and wine were produced, conversation began, paintings and drawings were admired. In fact Leo was so enthusiastic that Flora became alarmed because she could tell the young artists were beginning to hope he would buy something. Dressed in his beautiful silver-grey suit he appeared to have money. Flora hastily produced the fact that Leo was teaching English in one of the cheapest language schools in Barcelona. The sculptor, whose name was Parker and who appeared to enjoy being outspoken, exclaimed: "What, that hole! You must be hard up for something to do!" Leo, looking a little put out, said: "They are very decent people and were the first to offer me work. I like the director, and the teaching, although it is a little tiring." "I can see that," Parker muttered into his wine glass. "I've never seen anyone look more exhausted."

John Wyndham hurriedly ushered his guests onto the balcony, which was a mass of green fernery resembling giant parsley. "All this belongs to my landlady," he explained. "She uses it when we are not here—rather a bore because she has to have the studio key. You sometimes get that kind of thing here. The real nuisance is that we have to leave the place tidier than we would and put away all nude drawings before we leave at night."

Flora leant over the balustrade. "You get quite a different view from ours. You can see Mont Juich and that fascinating but sad fort. I think it is a better one than ours."

Parker, who had joined them on the balcony, remarked: "Of course, John has a better view. He can see you. I've seen

you hundreds of times myself, gazing out across a waste of roofs."

Flora coloured and said: "It's only because I'm alone so much."

"If you are alone so much, you had better come and sit for me. Give you something to do and me something to sculpt."

Flora turned to Leo to see what he thought of this suggestion, but he looked at his watch and said it was time they were going, he had four classes that evening. John said, "We should be having a couple of pupils about now; but they are awfully unreliable and, if they fail to turn up, they try to get out of paying for the lesson. Eduardo is good at dealing with that, though." The Spanish partner laughed and said, "It is nothing, I'm used to them, that's all." He spoke good English and, except for his suit, might have been an Englishman. Nevertheless he raised Flora's hand to his lips when she left and it pleased her immensely.

"To think I've been in Spain for three months and it's the only time it has happened," she observed as soon as the blue door closed behind them.

As they left the building, Leo said, "I like your English voices coming through the door! One Irish, one Spanish, one phoney Lancashire and only one pure English. What a pleasant boy John Wyndham is." Then he added: "I don't think I care for Parker much."

The window shutters in the flat were the modern kind that resemble roll-top desks, so Flora had to remove her plants from the sill each night. The morning after the tea party, when she was replacing the pots, she saw John signalling to her from the studio window. He kept pointing downwards and making motions as if to lift something to his lips, which she interpreted as an invitation to drink coffee in the corner bar. She nodded her head in agreement, and a few minutes

later they were sitting together over a yellow-topped table, drinking Espresso coffee.

"What did you make of Parker?" John asked.

"Well, I thought him rather amusing, but Leo didn't take to him."

"It's that downright way of speaking, I expect. It does put people off when they first meet him; but he's a wonderful person really. A great character. Always going out of his way to do a kindness and befriending young people. You met Brian, our Irish assistant. He found him wandering round the Plaza Real like a stray dog, picking up scraps from Americans sitting outside the Jazz Club. He was completely penniless and the sad thing was that he had been writing home to his parents, asking them to wire money to a certain bank, but they never received the letters. He had been posting them in the waste-paper boxes, like that thing over there." He indicated a neat box with a letter-box mouth fixed to a post. 'Parker took the poor boy home and looked after him until the money did arrive. Also, knowing we needed an assistant artist, he put him in touch with us, and it has worked out very well, although I expect he will be moving on soon when his visa expires; of course, he isn't really supposed to work without a permit.'

They sat talking under a watery sun and Flora felt happier than she had felt for weeks. Above the sound of the traffic she could hear the constant jingle of the bells the horses wore and occasionally the knife-grinder's shrill pipes. John showed her photographs of his girl friend, Meg. She appeared to be a lovely girl, with a mass of dark hair and a gleaming pillar of a neck. Flora, feeling slightly embarrassed as one does when shown family photographs, studied them intently; then, turning to John, said: "Oh, she is beautiful! Really lovely in a pre-Raphaelite way. When do you think you will be able to marry?" John studied the photographs for a moment before

returning them to his wallet. "If things go well, she should be out here in the New Year, or I may go to England; it would be easier to be married there. Eduardo isn't frightfully keen on having a woman working in the studio, but I think he will change his mind when he meets Meg."

They continued to talk for a few more minutes. Then Flora left to shop at a near-by market, which seemed to sell every imaginable vegetable in or out of season, luxurious fruit, mountains of red meat, fresh fish, salted fish and dried bacalao, the bacalao sometimes cut into lacy patterns so that it resembled strange hanging skeletons. Outside the market there were stalls displaying vivid nylon underwear, embroidered children's clothes, hardware, lace, jewellery, china and glass and brightly coloured toys. Flora found it fascinating but wished she had someone to share it with—one of her sisters for preference.

Flora was the youngest and smallest of four golden-headed sisters. Their father had been a retired colonel living on his pension with his four young daughters in a Hertfordshire village. By the time his eldest daughter, Ann, was old enough to manage the house his ailing wife died; it was as if she had been waiting for her daughter's maturity to die, when it would cause the least inconvenience. The sisters were very united and, although they were popular in the neighbourhood and led fairly social lives, they were happiest when alone together in their shabby stone house facing the village green. Behind the house there was a large garden, where the colonel spent most of his time bent over flowerbeds or pushing a wheelbarrow. Sometimes he let himself go with a bonfire. The second daughter, Linda, was musical and used to bicycle into Hitchin twice a week for music lessons; otherwise the education the girls received had been from resident governesses. The only game they played was tennis and during the summer they were invited to tennis parties, occasionally giving



one themselves. It was at one of these tennis parties that Linda met the young man who later became her husband. She felt almost guilty and embarrassed that she had done such an extraordinary thing as to fall in love, and at first met her lover secretly in Hitchin; but later she confessed to her sisters that she loved and wanted to marry. Then the father had to be told. He was utterly amazed that one of his daughters should want to leave her happy home and go off with some stranger she had only known a few weeks; but after Linda married, the girls became restless, as if they were waiting for something, perhaps more young men. Then the third sister, Alice, went for a long visit to Linda in London and, when she returned, her father had to be told the awful fact that she was also in love and wanted to marry a young barrister. He was a most presentable man with a private income; but in spite of this the father tried to delay the marriage for a year on the grounds that he couldn't afford the expense of another wedding so soon after Linda's. He would sit in the potting-shed with his seed catalogues spread before him, but every now and then he would look up and gaze sadly through the little window, bang his knee with one hand and say: "How can they do it? I can't understand it." Nevertheless, he disconsolately gave his daughter away at her marriage a few weeks later.

When Flora was eighteen and Ann twenty-six, the Colonel died, his pension naturally dying too. The girls were left with a mortgaged house, some tired furniture, twenty-two bottles of vintage port and about five hundred pounds between them. The stone house with its flower-filled garden was sold and the small sum of money it realized was divided between the four sisters. Ann and Flora moved to London, where they shared a flatlet—a dark bed-sitting room with a kitchen attached, in Earl's Court Road. Flora always remembered this time as the gas-smelling period. The room, the food, their clothes, every-

thing seemed to smell of gas or taste of gas. Most evenings they visited one or other of their sisters, who lived within walking distance. Ann was to take a secretarial course, as she had already had a little experience of office work as a voluntary helper in the local hospital. It was difficult to find a suitable niche for Flora, who had vague artistic leanings and little education and was at that time in poor health. A flower shop was tried, and at first seemed the ideal solution. Flora with her delicate beauty looked like a flower herself and in her gentle way proved quite a good saleswoman. Then the winter came and the hours of standing in the necessarily cool atmosphere became too much for her. Her hands and feet burned with chilblains and she never appeared to be free from colds. Her sisters consulted each other and took her away from flowers and transplanted her to a Chelsea friend's antique shop. It was at a time when antique shops were booming and Flora loved the work, eventually putting her small capital into the shop and becoming a partner. She attended auction sales, learnt to bid with a poker face, developed a sixth sense where to hunt for bargains, and read all she could about antique furniture and china, completely changing from the clinging, delicate girl she had been into an efficient—and also beautiful—young woman. She never lost her nervous, childish manner, but it was not a disadvantage in the shop, her timidity often inspiring confidence in the wary; and her looks won considerable admiration from the men customers. She was so enchanted with her shop that she had no time for love, at least not until Leo started buying early Victorian china in a rather reckless manner. China dogs with baskets of flowers moulded into their faces, hollow-bodied white swans, two sorrowing figures supported by an urn with a flat tree sprouting from it, Garibaldi and Wellington had left the shop in knobby parcels with hardly a word exchanged. It was while Flora was wrapping up a Rockingham poodle

with two puppies that Leo said crossly: "I suppose you are not free to have dinner with me this evening?" Then he noticed that the hands which were fumbling with the clumsy little parcel were shaking, and he added in a strained voice: "You see I love you very much."

They were married six months later, and at first resided in Leo's bachelor flat in Westminster. He had inherited it from his father, an economist and a man of austerity; whatever alterations they made in the flat, the father's influence seemed to predominate. When Flora hung blue brocade curtains in her bedroom, the blue appeared to turn grey; the antique furniture that had seemed so attractive in her shop became severe or clumsy as soon as it reached its new home; even comfortable chairs became uncomfortable; as for Garibaldi, Wellington and the dogs with their silly faces and baskets in their mouths, they looked pathetic in that sedate drawing-room. It seemed that the father's favourite brown, grey and sage-green crept into everything, even their food. They were not sorry to give up the lease of the flat when Flora found she was expecting a child. She also sold her share in the antique shop and they bought a small house in Margaretta Terrace with a paved garden behind, where a willow tree grew. The house was re-decorated from attic to basement, Flora painting the nursery walls herself. None of her sisters had as yet produced a baby, so it seemed as if this baby was to be shared between them. They all knitted and sewed little garments, far too many for a single baby; they poured over books on the care of infants. Three different kinds of hairbrush were bought for a child that would probably arrive in the world without a hair on its head. There were two cradles, a carry-cot, several sorts of baby chairs. Flora had to turn another bedroom into a second nursery to take the quantity of gifts that arrived for the unborn child. She sometimes felt the only decent thing she could do was to produce triplets. A maternity nurse arrived, an

irritable woman, who turned Flora's and Leo's bedroom into a sort of workhouse maternity ward. She had the carpet taken up and the bed was placed on rough old bricks she had managed to discover in the garden—"snails and slugs simply clinging on them," Flora wailed down the telephone to her sisters. The nurse examined Flora with a flinty eye and remarked: "You appear to be a very queer shape. Shouldn't be surprised if we have trouble. Your hips are too narrow, too."

The nurse's prophecy proved only too true. After a labour lasting thirty-six hours, during which the nurse kept muttering reproachfully, "a lazy uterus, that's the trouble," the family doctor became worried and called in a gynaecologist; Flora was rushed to hospital for an emergency operation which resulted in her life being saved, but the baby dying.

It was only after she left the hospital that she was told she would be unable to have another child. Leo would not in any case have let her risk her life a second time; but Flora was already planning to start another baby as soon as possible. Her arms seemed to ache with emptiness. When she returned to the house in Margaretta Terrace, the two nurseries had disappeared and in their place were a spare room and a small library for Leo's books. "But where are all my baby's things?" she cried indignantly. "I shall be needing them very soon." When Leo told her the truth, it made her almost hate him. She talked wildly of adopting a child; but Leo was very much against it, and gradually they made a new life for themselves. At first the childless house seemed pointless to Flora and she suggested selling it and moving into a small flat—anything to get away from the scene of her bitter disappointment. Then Leo returned one evening with Poker, a black poodle puppy, and later with a Siamese kitten, and the following summer she realized the attractions of the small garden and there was no more talk of moving.

After the baby's death, Flora's sisters became even more

devoted to her, always asking after her health, bringing her plants for her garden, accompanying her on shopping expeditions, advising and helping her in every way. Leo would take time off to accompany her to the dentist, and draw maps if she had to take the shortest journey by herself. They forgot the capable Flora who had managed so well during her days in the King's Road antique shop, and had travelled alone in the provinces to attend sales, often staying the night in small local inns. She lost much of her self-confidence and independence, and became as she had been as a girl. In appearance, although still a pretty woman, she had a slightly faded, pinched look and she was spoken of as thin, instead of slim. When Leo was detained in hospital for several months with lung trouble Flora had to manage on her own, and at first the thought of even paying the electricity bill terrified her. When an official-looking demand for Schedule A came through the letter-box, she panicked and rushed through the streets to her nearest sister with the offending document held before her as if it were a burning torch. But after a few weeks alone she began to manage very well, even doing a little entertaining on her own.

The doctors warned Leo that unless he took the utmost care of himself the lung trouble was likely to return, and suggested that he should live somewhere where the climate was kind. The thought of spending another long period in hospital terrified Leo; anything was better than that. He discussed the idea of starting a new life abroad with Flora, not mentioning the doctor's opinion that his lung might trouble him again, just saying it was advisable for his health. If Flora had not had this period of standing on her own feet she would have been unable to face such a drastic step; but to Leo's surprise she welcomed the idea and used to arrive at the hospital armed with gazetteers and travel books which they pored over together. When Leo recovered and they carried out their

plans, her sisters, not knowing the precarious state of Leo's health, were astonished and rather hurt.

Although Flora had parted from her sisters quite light-heartedly, she now missed them more than anything she had left behind and the days their letters came were always special days.

THREE

ONE MORNING, A few days after Flora's visit to the 'Atico Artists', there was a ring at her front-door bell and, peering through the spy-hole, she saw a miniature Parker looking more like a toy sailor than ever. She opened the door to him and, to her astonishment, received a friendly kiss. She was glad Leo was not present. Parker rolled into the flat as if it belonged to him and, glancing round, remarked: "So this is where you live. Not very inspiring, but comfortable perhaps." Flora rushed to the drink cupboard and nervously clinked bottles and glasses; but Parker said: "Take your head out of that cupboard. I don't want anything to drink. Haven't any time, but wanted to arrange when you will come and sit for me." Flora was flustered. She knew Leo would not want her to pose in Parker's studio, but she considered he had been too hasty in his judgement of Parker—John seemed to have such a good opinion of him. She mumbled that she was not free in the morning. "Well, when are you free then?" Parker demanded. "You don't spend your entire day shut up in this flat, do you?"

"No, of course not." She plucked a loose thread on her sleeve, then added: "No, I'm free most afternoons and most evenings as well."

Parker was already walking towards the hall as he said: "Good. I'd have preferred the morning, but it can't be helped. Let's make it three o'clock tomorrow afternoon. Here's my

card. Get John to bring you if you can, but it's quite near. Only a little way up the hill; you can walk it in ten minutes. Goodbye, dear"—a pat on the shoulder, another kiss on the cheek, and he was gone.

"What have I done?" she thought as she closed the door. "Leo will be furious, but he can't expect me to stay in this boring flat all day. I'll wait until we have a drink before I tell him."

As they sat over their sherry, Flora tried to tell her husband that she had agreed to sit for Parker, but he appeared to be so tired and depressed that she couldn't bring it out. Feeling her tension, he remarked irritably: "I wish you wouldn't twist your glass about like that, you'll break it." I'll try tonight, she thought despondently; but by the evening, when he had returned from his final class, he was even more tired, and with surprise she noticed he was knocking back Torres gin at an alarming rate. While she was dishing up in the kitchen, she heard him helping himself to yet another glass. "He'll have an awful head in the morning," she muttered over her saucepans; "at this rate I'll never be able to tell him."

That is exactly what happened the following afternoon. Before Flora left the flat shortly after two-thirty, she told Leo she had some shopping to see to. "But the shops will be closed until four," he remarked in surprise. "Oh, it's something I saw in the market, some material I saw. I couldn't buy it this morning because I had not enough money with me." Confused, she added: "Anyway, I feel like a walk." For the first time in ten years' married life Flora had lied to Leo. Feeling guilty as she left the building, she consoled herself with the thought that it was Leo's fault because he made it so difficult for her to tell him things.

She had allowed almost half an hour to find Parker's studio and, by asking several passers-by the way in her appalling Spanish, she found herself, before long, outside the very un-

usual house where he lived. It was built on a triangular island between three roads. The front of the house appeared to be only two stories high, with a large balcony dominated by a crumbling cast of *The Winged Victory*. Although the house was exceedingly grimy it had a certain charm, and it was built on such a steep hill that it had two extra floors at the back. The back was painted a deep terracotta and seemed to have no relation to the front. The sloping garden was a tangle of orange trees and shrubs, ending in a large iron gate whose peeling red paint was varied with rust. She was not certain where the entrance was. The rusty gate was partly open but refused to open any farther because of the jungle growing behind; so, after struggling with it for a few minutes, she went to the front of the house and, seeing the door had a large iron knocker consisting of a woman's hand holding a ball, she took the hand and gave three loud knocks that caused the flakes of paint to fall on the stone step. No one came, so she gave the door a slight kick. This moved it a few inches and another kick caused it to open properly, and she could see into the cellar-like hall with several brown doors leading from it. It did not appear as if anyone lived there; so she went up a staircase which led to a landing flooded with afternoon sun. Two of the doors had PARKER painted across them, so she knocked at the nearest one. "Come in, come in," shouted Parker. "Was that you banging at the door below? You didn't expect me to come down and let you in, did you?"

Flora nervously opened the door and walked in. She had never visited a sculptor's studio before and stood looking round in amazement. White walls and plaster figures, bins of clay, burst bags of plaster and cement, a few bronze heads and a bench littered with plaster and gelatine moulds. The old red-tiled floor was streaked with plaster and clay; but the room had a strange chalky beauty and Flora thought it delightful. Parker was standing in front of a three-legged

easel with a revolving top, building clay onto an armature. "Thought I'd get the dull part over before you arrived." He gave an unexpectedly charming smile and added: "It was very good of you to come."

Flora found herself sitting on a revolving platform, which Parker twisted round when he wanted to study her head from a different angle. She had had her portrait painted several times during the early years of her marriage and had found it a strain—she had fainted on one occasion. Sitting for a sculptor was far more restful. It did not necessitate her keeping perfectly still, although it was a little disconcerting when Parker advanced on her with clayey callipers in his hand. He talked as he worked: "I never feel happy until I've got a rough suggestion of the profile. Yours is difficult because it is so delicate." Once, during a long silence, he demanded: "Well, say something amusing," which paralysed Flora's tongue for quite a while. He told her how he liked to help young artists and that the only real happiness he knew was to help others. After this remark she was surprised to hear him admit that he had been divorced by his wife and had left England to escape paying her alimony. "She is perfectly capable of earning her own living. She was working as a secretary when I married her, so it won't hurt her to work again. If she doesn't like it she can find another fool to marry her." Flora murmured vaguely: "Oh, well, if there are no children." "Children?" Parker looked disconcerted. "As a matter of fact there are a couple of little boys. I offered to take the eldest but she wouldn't hear of it. She always was an unreasonable woman; we couldn't get on at all."

Flora thought, 'By now Leo will have left the flat to give one of his private lessons. It should be all right if I'm home in about an hour.' She watched Parker sprinkle a little water over the clay, then wrap a rubber sheet round it. "That's all for today, but I would like to work on it again tomorrow."

I'll give you a cup of tea before you go." She followed Parker into an old-fashioned kitchen that led from the studio, where a kettle was simmering over charcoal. He took up a round grass fan and waved it about before a hole below the kettle, which immediately began to sing. "It'll be ready in about five minutes, so I'll show you the rest of the place while we are waiting," he said as he methodically hung the fan back on a nail. The balcony she had seen from the street opened from the studio. There were no flowers there, only broken sculpture. The studio and kitchen were on the north side of the house, but across the hall there was a large room lit with pinkish evening sunlight which streamed in through two big windows. It was a most attractive room, the whitewashed walls hung with unframed paintings. The furniture was sparse but good—old painted chests and cupboards, carved wooden figures with faded gilt showing here and there, a large divan covered with ragged brocade, and several white pottery vases filled with carefully arranged flowers "given me by some of my young friends who know I love flowers". The beautiful room and love of flowers surprised Flora. Parker appeared to be such a downright sort of man, but she was beginning to realize that his rather unpleasant manner was most likely a protective pose. He completely charmed her as they drank their tea in front of an open log fire and she was sorry to leave. She almost ran down the hill, arriving home a few minutes before Leo, in time to put some soup on the electric ring and give the place an inhabited air.

That evening she managed to tell Leo that Parker had asked her to sit for him; but she did not mention that she had already done so. "You see it will make a sort of interest in my day," she pleaded when she saw Leo's disapproving expression. "But the afternoon is practically the only time we have together," he said crossly, "and I dislike Parker intensely."

"I think you have made a mistake about him, darling. That manner is all a pose. I'm sure he is really a kind and sympathetic sort of person;" and then, realizing that perhaps she had said too much, added: "At least, he seemed like that to me when he asked me to pose."

It ended in Leo agreeing to her spending a few afternoons in Parker's studio. "That doesn't mean I want to become intimate with him or find him sitting about the flat when I come home."

She snapped back: "I expect he'd hate to sit in this beastly flat. It's not at all inspiring." Then, contritely: "Sorry, darling. I'm being horrid." She crossed the room and kissed her husband. She felt mean and guilty.

The third afternoon Flora went to the studio two things happened. The first to occur was the sudden appearance of a large Swedish woman wearing a duffel coat and green trousers. She spoke good English; at least her accent was good and she was more than fluent. She burst into the studio, flung her arms round Parker's neck and kissed him on both cheeks. "Now, you old bastard, what have you been doing with yourself? Got a new girl friend, I see. She's a poppet." Turning to Flora she said: "I've been trying to have a bash at Parker for years, but he won't look at me, I'm too damn big. I'm Gerda; I'm sure you are called Ann." Flora told Gerda her name, mentioning primly that, if she was not called Ann herself, her sister was. She liked the red-faced jolly woman; but she was sure Leo would dislike her even more than he disliked Parker.

Gerda produced a bottle of real Scotch whisky and that was the end of the sitting. They crossed the hall to the living-room and sat round the fire drinking whisky and water. It was four o'clock in the afternoon and Flora found the first glass difficult to get down; but soon she was enjoying her third glass. She thought to herself, 'It's a pity they don't have

chlorophyll tablets here. I shall have to clean my teeth before I see Leo.' She sat silent, listening to Gerda with vague surprise, half understanding her highly-coloured account of what she had been doing in Paris for the last few months. Gerda ended her story with: "And now, Parker, I expect you know why I'm pouring whisky down your mean old throat. I want you to put me up for a couple of nights." He laughed. "That doesn't surprise me at all. You always use the place as if it was a hotel, but you'll have to sleep in the studio. I'm not having you in here, most likely waking me up at three in the morning drunk." She shrugged her large shoulders. "All right, keep your hair on, you're lucky to have any at your age." She turned to Flora: "He's forty-three, but he's worn well considering the life he leads." Parker gave a sharp laugh as he replied that at least he didn't get drunk five nights a week—"Couldn't do my work if I did."

The second occurrence was that when Flora said it was time to go home Parker followed her into the hall, drew her to him and kissed her passionately, in a way that Leo had never kissed her. She freed herself from his arms, more disturbed by the fact that she had responded to Parker's kisses than that he had kissed her. Was it the result of drinking whisky in the afternoon? she pondered as she walked rather unsteadily home.

The next morning she felt slightly uneasy and depressed. She was not sure if it was due to alcoholic remorse or guilt. As she prepared the breakfast she could hear the dustman's horn and visualized him as he ran from door to door frantically blowing his horn, while the dustmen who were emptying the bins followed more slowly. In the hall Leo was brushing the suit he intended to wear, and this morning the brushing got on her nerves. He had already spent about ten minutes brushing the suit he had worn the previous day. 'Then he grumbles if the coffee isn't hot,' she thought bitterly as she

scraped the burnt toast. She tried to remember if she had made any arrangements to pose for Parker that afternoon. If she failed to come, he would think she was making an unnecessary fuss about the love-making on the stairs; but, if she went to the studio when he was not expecting her, he might think she was in the way—in any case he might have arranged to do something with Gerda.

When Leo left the house with his case of school books, she attacked the housework, sweeping under chairs and beds with her grass broom and polishing the landlord's dreary furniture. She took down the brown-velvet curtains which smelt of stale soup, tobacco and old men, and hung them over the window-sill to air. She felt slightly better afterwards. She took a shower, put on fresh clothes and made up her face with care; while she was examining her handbag to see how much money she had for shopping, there was a ring at the bell. "Oh, God! I bet it's the water-rate or some man collecting money," she groaned as she hurried to answer the second ring. She forgot to look through the spy-hole and was surprised to see Parker, looking very smart in a grey-tweed suit with a portfolio under his arm. He told her he was on his way to a business appointment, but wanted to make sure she was coming to the studio in the afternoon. They stood talking together in the pink-tiled hall. Flora hardly heard what Parker was saying because with one hand he was gently and apparently absent-mindedly stroking her in a most intimate way. 'If I move he'll think I'm a prig,' she thought, as she tried to concentrate on what he was saying—something about Gerda's paintings and a business appointment and plaster casts. He only stayed a few minutes but when he left the flat Flora was trembling as she sank into a hard hall-chair.

That evening she wrote in her diary:

Leo has just left the house for a four-hour session teaching in the school. He is tired all the time and we hardly

talk to each other except when we have a drink together. I think we are drinking too much, Leo in particular. He says he has to have it to keep him going.

I'm being sculpted by Parker. I am pleased to get out of the flat and to meet people and I like sitting; but I don't know what I think of Parker. I wish I knew how other women behaved and felt. I only know about my sisters, and we all feel pretty much the same about things, at least we used to. I wonder if Linda and Alice are kissed by their husbands in that way.

Now it is winter, most of the bars are boxed in with wood and glass. No more sitting on the pavement watching people passing—it's not the same through glass. Some of the small bars are still open; the one where I first met John is. When I was sitting there yesterday morning, I saw a very old man and his wife coming slowly up the underground steps. The old man was blind. When he reached the top step he turned round, facing his wife, who was a step below. She wore a black shawl and was very, very old. She bent down a little and with her knotted hands tried to button her husband's fly buttons. Several passers-by joined her and offered to help, eventually he was decently buttoned and they went tottering off together into the winter sunlight. No false modesty and so much kindness.

I often hang the clothes out at night so that other women can't see how bad the sheets have got. Perhaps they would appear cleaner if I put blue in the water.

I try to think of other things but keep thinking of Parker, and I don't know what to do.

This was the last entry in Flora's diary for several months.

FOUR

FLORA SAT FOR Parker eight more times before the very charming head was completed. Everyone who saw it considered it a delightful piece of work and an excellent likeness. Even Leo was pleased with it; his visit to the studio had passed off quite well. The head was sold and replicas appeared in a chain optician's windows wearing the latest design in sunglasses. Flora was most distressed when she discovered this a few months later, but there was nothing she could do about it except look the other way when she passed an optician's window. Fortunately Leo never noticed, because it was not his habit to look in shop windows, unless they were book-shops.

When the head was finished there was no reason for Flora to visit the studio; but somehow it had become an established thing that she would call in most evenings while Leo was giving evening classes. Parker did not like turning out on winter nights himself, so expected his friends to call on him. It was easy to make an excuse for the visits: a good programme on the wireless; an evening roasting chestnuts by the open fire; a letter he wanted an opinion on, etc. Except for the occasion on the stairs, there were no more passionate kisses; but a certain amount of absent-minded caressing went on, which Flora pretended not to notice although it bewildered and excited her. She put up no resistance at all when Parker decided it was time to seduce her, and he congratulated him-

self on obtaining such a sweet little mistress with so little trouble. Even the tears of remorse he expected on the first occasion never occurred.

Flora felt no remorse. She was living in a dream where nothing was real except Parker's love-making. There was no suggestion that she should leave Leo and take up residence in Parker's studio. If he had made such a suggestion she would not have agreed to it. All she wanted was the two stolen hours she managed about five evenings a week and the rest of the time she lived in a kind of listless suspension. She prepared Leo's meals and showed him a vague affection, chattering inconsequently to him if he appeared to expect it, otherwise remaining in a silent dream. He, poor man, was so exhausted by spending an average of nine hours a day giving English lessons, combined with travelling to and from the school and his private pupils' homes, that he hardly noticed his wife's changed attitude towards him. When it did occur to him that she was strangely quiet and absent-minded he thought, 'Poor thing, she is bored to death and there is little I can do about it. I should get a few days off at Christmas, then I'll be able to take her out a bit—if we can possibly afford it.' Sometimes it crossed his mind that she was looking extraordinarily pretty and well, and he was relieved to think that at least the mild climate suited her.

As soon as Leo left in the evenings, loaded down with his case of books, Flora would put on her coat and rush from the flat. She would arrive at Parker's studio breathless from hurrying up the hill, usually standing outside the door for a moment hoping not to hear the voices of his young friends. Sometimes when she entered, Parker would be working on a great mound of clay and would give the impression that he was so engrossed that he had not noticed her presence in the studio. Flora would creep to the stove, not daring to disturb the great man at his work; then to her relief he would smile

at her. At first she would take this as a sign that she could run to him and bury her face against his shoulder, waiting for his kisses; but she soon realized that she must keep her feelings under control and only show her love when Parker was in the right mood. He must always make the first advances, and she must take her mood from him. Sometimes they would cross the passage to the other room and love-making would start immediately, and on the really happy evenings they would sit half-dressed in the firelight afterwards, Parker talking and being gentle with her. She knew that she had never been happier than at these times. She would question him about his childhood with his drunken parents in Sheffield. "They fought like hell, my parents, but they were devoted to each other in way. There is nothing like drink to bind people together, provided they both drink. They don't feel so bad about it when they live with someone who appears to behave worse even than they do, and they understand each other's craving. It's a great tie." His brothers and sisters, whom he had lost touch with: "I suppose they are wandering round Sheffield somewhere." His marriage: "I must have been mad, but she was the most lovely little thing with red-gold hair and it was only after I married her I noticed she had a mouth like a trap. Still, if I hadn't had a wife to escape from, I might never have landed here. I'm as happy as a king and get a lot of pleasure helping all these young people. Do you know I've helped you quite a lot? You are a different girl since I've made love to you, and I hope you're grateful." "Perhaps that's one way of looking at it," Flora said rather tartly. She was a little hurt by some of his remarks.

Quite often their evenings were disturbed by visitors. They would knock on the door and, if there was no reply, tactfully go away. If it was convenient, Parker would tell them to open the door and walk in. It was one of his minor affectations never to answer the door to anyone. His collection of young

people were mostly English, although there were a few English-speaking Dutch and Germans among them. Some of them were artists and writers; others unashamedly did nothing and, if this resulted in a considerable amount of scrounging, they had no qualms about it. Often they would arrive with newspaper parcels containing food which they wanted to cook in Parker's kitchen, and he would say: "All right, all right, but don't bother me." Sometimes girls wanted to wash their clothes and he would tell them to wash themselves while they were about it. Then there were the people who just wanted to be warm: "Parker, we are so cold. Can we share your fire?" It usually meant they shared a meal as well. Most of these shiftless young people had been living in more picturesque parts of Spain but had drifted to Barcelona on their way back to England. They hung on to Barcelona until they were completely penniless and could not scrounge a meal or bed any longer. Then they happily hitch-hiked to Paris. If they had no friends to help them there they would have to pay a visit to the British Consul because it was impossible to hitch-hike across the channel. Parker's collection was changing all the time. The extraordinary thing was that with all their fecklessness they seldom came to any real harm.

Flora mentioned to Parker how disappointing they had found most of their excursions to the outskirts of Barcelona, the hills that appeared so romantic at a distance often turning out to be dried-up rubbish dumps, fairgrounds, or built-up suburbs. "But surely Leo has taken you to La Floresta, San Cugat and Las Planas? You can get there from the station under your block of flats." Flora admitted that she had never heard of those places and they didn't appear on the map outside the station. "Well, the man's a fool, that's all I can say. Uses the line every day and never has the gumption to notice where the trains go to. I'll get John to take you out one day soon. It's too cold for me, but you'll enjoy it and it's really

more beautiful at this time of the year than in the summer, when half Barcelona goes to picnic in the woods."

A day or two later John arrived at the flat while Flora was washing the bathroom floor. She was wearing an old blue dressing-gown and there was no make-up on her face; but John was an old friend now and was allowed to call whenever he liked. "Warm up the remains of the breakfast coffee, John, while I finish this wretched floor. I'm finished then for the morning except for shopping."

John plugged in the electric ring and placed the percolator on it. "Do you think you could manage to come to La Floresta with me?" he asked through the bathroom door. "Parker said you had never been there and it's a lovely morning. If we left in about half an hour we'd get the best of the day." The idea of a visit to the country pleased Flora very much and she lost all interest in cleaning the bathroom. She rushed into the living-room and wrote a shopping list on the fly-leaf of a Penguin and said: "Quick, John, do the shopping while I dress and get some ham and rolls while you are about it. Pink ham, not raw. We can take a picnic and leave something for Leo on a tray."

Within half an hour they were sitting in the train. Flora looked out of the windows eagerly. "But I know this way," she exclaimed in disappointment. "We've been here before and it wasn't at all interesting. Aren't we going to the real country?"

"Be patient," John laughed. "In five minutes you will be surrounded by hills and woods for as far as you can see."

The higher the rattling little train climbed the more beautiful it became, and soon it was as John had said and they were surrounded by woods and steep hills. Flora wanted to get out at each station; but John had decided to go to Floresta because on clear days there was an excellent view of Montserrat, which he intended to show her, and he con-

sidered the woods to be prettier there. They got out of the train at a small chilly station and smelt the clear mountain air. They followed several women carrying baskets and bundles up a steep flight of steps into a small square where there were several little bars and a few benches. "We can go directly to the woods down the hill or climb those steps across the road. The view will be better higher up and it will be drier underfoot. But let's have a drink first."

There was a bar at the foot of the flight of steep steps where they had a bottle filled with 'corriente' white wine. They drank small glasses of neat brandy to warm themselves while their bottle was being filled. In spite of the sun, the air was cool, much cooler than in Barcelona. Fortified by the drink they climbed the long flight of stone steps which led to a fairly good road. They passed pink and white villas with elaborate pointed roofs and gardens sloping down to the woods, and once a miniature barber's shop painted red, white and blue, looking strangely incongruous among the trees. The view was magnificent: hills, mountains and trees of various shades of green and gold under the intense blue sky. It seemed impossible that the great city of Barcelona, with its haze of silver smoke, was only a few miles away. Suddenly Flora clutched John's arm and exclaimed: "Look at that pointed mountain sticking up into the sky like a golden saw. It's like mountains in fairy stories and there should be a princess waiting to be rescued on top."

"You are not far wrong. There is a black virgin living half-way up. She was found in a cave and is very lonely, at least I think so, and the mountain is called after her—Montserrat, or perhaps it is the other way round. There are all sorts of legends about her and she is believed to be nearly a thousand years old. We must go up and see her when the weather is warmer and Meg is here."

They stood together looking at the mountain, which

appeared golden in the sun, the rocks and crags standing out clearly. They had just observed a long building which John thought was the monastery when Flora turned to John saying: "What was that you said about Meg coming. Is it definite?"

"Yes, didn't you know? I'm leaving for England a few days before Christmas and will be married as soon as it can be arranged. Of course she will come back with me and, as Brian will be leaving about then, she can take his place in the studio. I told you how well we are doing there, didn't I? Work simply pouring in—touch wood."

"Touch wood? You couldn't be in a better place for touching wood." She laughed as she looked round at the trees which surrounded them. "I'm so glad everything is turning out so well and longing to meet Meg. I haven't met a single woman I can talk to since I left England. I hope she won't think I'm awfully old." John reassured her on this point as they took a path that led deep into the woods, a path where no one else had walked that day—it was spanned over and over again with spider's webs decorated with glistening beads of water.

They ate their lunch in a sheltered clearing. When they had finished, Flora scattered the uneaten bread for the birds, then sat on a rock drinking the remains of the wine while John leant against a tree-trunk, drawing. An old woman carrying a sack on her back slowly passed, muttering to herself, every now and then bending down to pick up a stick or fir-cone that attracted her. A group of magpies settled in a near-by tree, breaking the stillness with their harsh cries. Disturbed, Flora stood up. She said: "I feel full of wine, food and fresh air; if I don't move about I shall fall asleep."

John admitted that he felt the same and suggested they continued their walk, vaguely making for the station. "If we

turn sharply to the left we will come out near a bakery in about twenty minutes, although we appear to be miles from anywhere." As they passed the bakery Flora stopped to remark on the bundles of dead pine branches stacked outside. "They must have enormous ovens to take those great branches. I think I'll take a few of these cones for Parker's fire." John did not reply but bent down and filled her basket with the cones; but as they were walking away he said: "Do you know? I think old Parker has a new girl friend. He always seems to be out or pretending to be if I call there in the evening, yet he doesn't seem to be particularly keen on any of those girls who hang round the studio. She must be someone new. He isn't particularly handsome, in fact he's almost ugly; but he always gets the most attractive women. He's had at least four since I've known him. Two girls even fought over him. It was a frightful business and he had to tip a bucket of water over them eventually. Then they both turned on him and he had to defend himself with a bag of plaster. You can imagine the mess. The plaster sort of set on them. I arrived towards the end and helped clean them up; their clothes were ruined and their hair and faces unbelievable. I felt really sorry for the girls, but Parker refused to have either of them in the studio again."

Flora looked rather bleak. "Let's hurry, John; I'm beginning to feel cold. Tell me about your wedding plans. Will you be married in a church or registry office, and is it to be the sort of wedding where the men wear hired suits? "

They walked in the sunny patches between the trees, John happily talking about his coming marriage, which was to take place in a Kensington registry office. "But there will be a party afterwards. One of the masters from the school is lending us his studio and the wine will be provided by Meg's father; he's a wine merchant in Guildford." Flora walked beside him only half-hearing what he said. 'Four women since

John has known him ! How long can it last? He never says he loves me; but I thought that was just his way. If it comes to that, do I love Parker? The days I don't see him are wasted days though. I mustn't think. I must look at the trees and listen to John talking about his happiness.' "John, look how pretty that bush is, the berries are like wild strawberries." Then: "Oh John, I'm cold ! Let's go home."

FIVE

THE FIRST SIGN of Christmas was the 'Navidad' lottery—even the postmen sold tickets when they delivered letters. Then the 'vigilante' called, obviously expecting a Christmas tip. He presented Flora with a card displaying ancient and modern 'vigilantes', the Holy Family and Barcelona cathedral. There was a long poem printed on the back. Later the road-sweeper called with his card—this displayed a smiling road-sweeper accompanied by the Holy Family, a roast bird, a bottle of champagne, a bottle of *anis*, a box of cigars and a pineapple. There was also a poem on the back. The dustman presented his card, and so did the postman, the telegraph boy, the grocery boy and even the man who oiled the lift. These cards were all *só* charming that Flora and Leo thought they were well worth ten pesetas a time. On December the first Christmas decorations began to appear in the shops—tinsel and glass balls for Christmas trees; snowmen and robins; cards and calendars. Later the streets were decorated; even the lamp standards were made to resemble Christmas trees, all hung with coloured glass balls. Through the walls and floors of the flat drifted the sound of radios constantly playing out-of-date gramophone records: 'I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas' and 'Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer' were favourites, and for a pleasant change 'Silent Night'. Cards began to arrive from England and Flora's sisters wrote asking what kind of presents they pre-

ferred for Christmas and suggesting clothes and make-up, and English cigarettes for Leo. She hastily wrote asking them for books, not wanting the trouble and expense of parcels coming through the Customs. She wrote to a London shop where she had an account and ordered suitable gifts for her sisters. Then she tried to save on her housekeeping money so as to be able to buy Leo something.

Leo was teaching eight or nine hours a day, six days a week. He was so exhausted that his voice became flat and hoarse, and almost as soon as he sat down to read he would fall asleep and his book would drop to the floor. He looked utterly worn out, slumped forward in his chair with his long hands hanging limply down. It was when Flora saw her husband like this that she felt ashamed and genuinely sorry for the way she was behaving. She would sit curled up on the hideous sofa, feeling waves of guilt enveloping her like enormous blushes. At these times it seemed impossible that she could ever bring herself to visit Parker's studio again. 'I'm bad and dirty,' she thought. 'This feeling I have for Parker—it can't be love. It's quite different from the feeling I had, and perhaps still have, for Leo. It must be infatuation. Sometimes I think I don't really like Parker; he amuses me, but I don't really trust or respect him; yet if I fail to see him for two or three days I feel frantic and when I'm near him I long for him to touch me and to keep close to him. I hate to think of him making love to any other woman—but then I'd hate Leo to as well, so perhaps I still love him.' There they would sit facing each other, Leo completely oblivious of the thoughts that were running through his wife's immature mind.

Often Flora would gently shake Leo's shoulders to awaken him for another three hours teaching. The thinness of his body through his jacket made her feel even more remorseful. He would wake with a start, exclaiming: "Oh! have I been

asleep again? " and stagger towards the bathroom to wash his face in cold water. A few minutes later he would leave the house. After his departure Flora would busy herself in the kitchen preparing the evening meal, which they would eat at about eleven o'clock on an early evening and sometimes considerably later. It depended on the classes. She would spin the kitchen work out as long as possible, then try and read the news in the *Vanguardia*, and she would find herself lighting a cigarette, stubbing it out half-smoked and lifting the heavy curtains to gaze out of the window at other lighted windows. Sometimes something would hold her attention for a few moments; but at least four nights a week she would find herself hurrying up the hill towards Parker's studio. If she was later than usual, she would find Parker eating a meal when she arrived, his dining-table littered with dishes and food; it was as if he had been sitting there for weeks. She was almost relieved if he was not alone—at least she was when she first arrived, but then, as her feeling of guilt wore off, she would exchange glances with Parker, trying to discover if his guests were staying the entire evening. When he told her he was spending Christmas in Madrid, she had been considerably shaken; but later, when she realized Leo would be at home for four days, she thought it just as well. At least she could give him her undivided attention and see that he rested.

Before he left for England John gave a small party. It was quite a simple Sunday-evening affair, attended by some of the young people from Parker's collection and a few Spanish business men who had patronized the studio. Flora was a great success with the Spaniards. After a few glasses of wine she found that her small Spanish vocabulary was adequate, and she was enjoying herself immensely until she noticed that Parker was stroking a red-haired girl's bare arm. She crossed the room to where he was standing and stood nervously plucking at her dress. At the sight of her frigid little face Parker

exclaimed: "Don't look so miserable. This is a party," and, slipping his disengaged arm round her waist, whispered: "I mustn't get my lines crossed, must I?"

Flora gave a feeble giggle and decided it was time she left; as she descended in the lift with Leo she looked across the box-like compartment and thought, 'Leo is like a prince compared with Parker. Why do I care about such a vulgar man? Lines crossed! I loathe expressions like that.' All the same she spent a restless night worrying about the plump and rosy red-head. At about three o'clock in the morning she suddenly sat up in bed and said: "It was stroking that he started with me." Leo woke up. "What's that you are saying?" he asked sleepily. "Go to sleep, it's only a dream I was having," she whispered.

Flora spent several mornings wandering round Barcelona looking at the beautifully dressed shop windows. Some of the women she passed were carrying little Christmas trees or bunches of mistletoe and there was a strong feeling of Christmas everywhere. Many of the shops near the cathedral displayed figures and animals for cribs, and there were fascinating plaster angels with golden wings flying round the windows suspended on fine wire. When she reached the cathedral square, she was surprised to see it had become a forest of fir trees. Close to the cathedral itself were stalls with little clay figures for cribs, holly and mistletoe, little trees and cacti and mosses. The whole effect was so lovely that Flora found herself deeply moved, and, walking up the steps, she went from stall to stall making small purchases. Several minute musical boxes were tinkling plaintive tunes which added to the delicate charm of the scene, and she could hardly bear to leave. Eventually she walked home feeling happier than she had felt for weeks. She carried numerous parcels and a tree in a pot and she half-expected the portero to say no Christmas trees were allowed in the building; but when she

passed him, he just glanced at it with a liverish eye and sighed. It was not the first tree that had passed him that morning.

When Leo returned at luncheon-time, he found an animated Flora kneeling on the hall floor surrounded by clay figures and animals. She was arranging moss on a large tray and planting cacti on it. "Look, Leo. Come and look at my beautiful crèche!" she exclaimed almost before he had entered the door. So, with his black hat still in his hand, he bent down to examine the Holy Family, the Three Kings and the extraordinary collection of animals the innkeeper seemed to have owned. "Do look at the Three Kings. Isn't the black one handsome? Do you know they have to be moved a little nearer the Holy Child every day until they are almost touching the crib on Epiphany—the day they called the 'Tres Reyes' here? A woman who kept one of the stalls was telling me all about it and I understood quite a lot of what she said. Do you think it matters that I couldn't afford a stable and they will have to sort of camp out under this cactus and this queer little palm tree?"

Leo smiled at this volley of questions and admired the Orient King, the little crib made of twigs, the Holy Child who did not appear to be a newly-born baby at all, and Mary's halo. "It's really a curtain ring; you can see if you look closely." Leo stood with his stiff hat in his hand looking down on his wife. 'I'd almost forgotten how she used to be,' he said to himself. 'How we have both changed in ourselves and towards each other! Lord, how happy we used to be without realizing it! Now we are ghosts of our former selves and I'm hardly even a ghost, I'm so dead.'

He carefully laid down his hat, drew Flora close to him and kissed her unresponsive lips. Feeling her coolness he immediately let her go and snapped: "Oh, leave all that and come and have a drink." He left her standing with a handful

of small objects in her hand. She stood for a moment, then put them gently on the table and called: "Leo, Leo, don't be cross. It was just that I was surprised." He did not answer and a moment later she heard the chink of bottles. 'Oh God!' she thought. 'We are only close together when we have a drink, and I don't really care for it much. Leo is drinking far too much as it is and it's mostly my fault. I must spend the holiday being a better wife and do all I can to improve things between us. But then,' she added ruefully, 'Parker will come back.'

On Christmas Eve Leo returned home laden with parcels, his brief-case bulging with bottles of champagne, his pockets with cigars and cigarettes. He unloaded them onto the buffet, remarking that he had had to take a taxi home. "But where did you get all these wonderful things?" Flora asked. "I thought we were so short of money." He laughed as he pulled a highly coloured scarf and an ash-tray from his overcoat pocket. "So we are, but they are all presents from the Director and my pupils. There's 'turrón'—you like that, don't you?" Flora assured Leo that she did as she continued to unwrap the various packages, exclaiming in delight all the time. They had been expecting to have a rather meagre Christmas and now all these delicious things had arrived.

The weather was glorious for Leo's four days' holiday, the sky a clear, pure blue and the air soft and springlike. One day they went to La Floresta, taking a picnic lunch which they ate in the garden of a small bar near the station. They sat at a marble-topped table under a ceiling of wistaria, with the sun showing through in golden patches. Two children wearing striped overalls were playing round their table, the girl pretending to be a lottery-ticket seller and holding out small pieces of paper, crying "Loteria, loteria" in a pathetic voice. The small boy was picking daisy heads and threading them on pine needles, completely absorbed. A smooth blue-grey cat

sat on the next table watching Flora and Leo as they ate. When the sun shone upon it through the moving leaves, faint tiger-like markings showed shadowy on its fur.

After their meal they wandered through the pinewoods examining the scattered villas and choosing which one they would live in if it were possible. "Look, Leo, if we had this one, we could paint it pink, and that room that has been built on would do as your study." Leo looked doubtful. "That house wouldn't do at all. It is so overlooked. I think this white one with the terrace at the back would suit us better. There's quite a nice pond in the garden and the view from the terrace must be marvellous." They walked close together, stopping every now and then to admire the view or some house that took their fancy. They found a deserted swimming pool like a tomb surrounded by cypress trees and they met a girl walking in a plantation of fir trees followed by sixteen cats, striped, tabby, black, piebald, white and one-eyed. "Come, Crotchet and Ricardo. Now, Mr Grey, behave. Ermine, Ermine, come down from that tree." It was only after the girl had disappeared between the trees that they realized that the cat-girl had been speaking in English. They could hear her prim, clear voice calling long after she was out of sight. They stood together looking down on a walnut grove where the leafless branches had turned a golden-yellow with some strange lichen; sloping down towards a fertile valley there was a sleeping vineyard, the stunted vines black and twisted like Dali moustaches.

They turned towards the station and, as they stood on the platform waiting for their train, they watched the sun turning into a burning bulls-eye sliding down behind the mountains. Then suddenly it was dark and cold and they were glad to hear the train rattling into the station, although it meant that the day they had enjoyed so much was over.

On Leo's last free morning they paid a visit to the Barcelona

Zoo, which they agreed was the most attractive they had seen—a sort of prison without bars, but a charming and apparently happy one. They were very taken with a rhinoceros which a keeper, dressed in his holiday clothes, was feeding with cabbage. Its eyes were placed so low in its head that they came below its nose. When it had munched its way through the green meal, the keeper patted and stroked it with great affection. The theory of the zoo seemed to be that different kinds of animals can live contentedly together in the right conditions. They were pleased to see hippopotamuses, zebras, ostriches, emus and various great horned creatures all in the same enclosure, only separated from the public by a narrow electric rail. They watched an elephant nozzling a giraffe with a friendly trunk and saw seven sleepy balls of black fur lying on a sunny shelf. They could not make out what sort of animals they were when they were not looking like old muffs. When they left the zoo they both agreed they would return frequently, but it was a long time before they did.

The holiday was over and Leo returned to his teaching feeling considerably better for the rest. He took on two more private pupils, who came to the flat for their lessons. They were both intelligent young men and he said it was almost a pleasure to teach them. The difficulty was how Flora should spend her time while lessons were in progress. If she sat in the bedroom, it was almost impossible to read or concentrate with the sound of the lesson . . . “No. 1 is a chair, No. 2 is a table” . . . coming through the communicating door. The kitchen was small and dark, and the other two rooms were almost unusable because they looked onto the lift shaft. She solved this problem most afternoons by visiting the British Institute, where she was able to sit in considerable comfort reading periodicals, week-old copies of *The Observer* and *The Sunday Times*. Although many of the readers were Spaniards there were some English people, mostly middle-aged. It was

one of the warmest places in Barcelona, with its central heating and large, sunny windows. There was one old lady with a brown felt hat on the top of her grey bun of hair, her face thin and blotched and her expression that of a starved sheep. From time to time she surreptitiously nibbled bread-like pieces of food produced from her pocket. Although she always appeared to be engrossed in some paper, she seldom turned a page. Flora wondered how it had happened that this old lady was spending her last days in Barcelona of all places. It was unlikely that she was a retired English nanny because her clothes were unkempt and her shoes had sharply pointed toes. Sometimes the hall was filled with grey-metal chairs in readiness for a lecture. Occasionally the subjects appealed to Flora, but more often they were on subjects like Robert Burns or English gardens. In spite of this Flora felt she should try these lectures out; but the thought of going alone and the sight of the waiting grey chairs intimidated her. 'Suppose I was bored?' she thought. 'I'd have to sit it out. It would be so rude to get up and leave, so noticeable in a small hall.' When the grey chairs were not in use there were red sofas and arm-chairs, comfortable ones where pretty Spanish girls sat and gossiped together between their English classes. Behind the Institute there was a deserted garden. It had paths edged with brilliant blue tiles; two dusty palm trees grew there, plumbago and geraniums too, but the thing that appealed to Flora most was an old black tom-cat with a round lugubrious face. Someone who was kind had made it a small house from a packing case and there were usually saucers of food beside it. She liked to think the cat was a great scholar who read the reference books when the Institute was deserted at night.

Parker was due to return on New Year's Eve, when he planned to give a party. It was his custom to give one every year. No invitations were issued, but it was an understood thing among his friends that they were welcome. Although

Leo was working that evening, he had agreed to join Flora at the studio later, at least in time to see the New Year in. Parker would only have returned from Madrid a few hours before the party commenced, but Flora could imagine the many willing helpers who would be flocking round the studio. She decided she would not be one of them—much better concentrate on her appearance and perhaps arrive with a bottle of something to drink. She went through her wardrobe, eventually selecting a long green and silver dress cut on classical lines. 'I know I shall look overdressed,' she thought, but it is so long since I have had the chance to wear an evening dress. She held the soft material against her cheek as if it was something to love, then spread it carefully on the bed while she selected suitable underclothes and stockings. She had a bath, manicured her nails, gave her hair a hundred strokes with the brush, mascaraed her eyelashes until they looked like beetles' legs, and then tried out three different-coloured lipsticks, eventually deciding on a pale one. 'I think it would be nice to be ethereal this evening,' she mused, 'perhaps dramatic eyes and little else on my face. I do so enjoy dressing up even if the party is a disappointment.' She left the house at about ten-thirty and, after waiting in vain for an unoccupied taxi, walked up the hill, holding up the skirt of her damask dress with one hand and the other occupied with a bottle of Tio Pepe. As she walked she began to feel a mounting excitement at the thought of seeing Parker again. 'I haven't exactly missed him this last week, but now I want him so much. I feel in such a loving mood.' Her good resolutions were dying with the old year.

Before she reached Parker's house she could hear the sounds of a party in progress, the animal rumble of men's voices and girls' excited cries and laughs, a gramophone playing and a man's voice shouting: "No, no! Not here, you fool!" Then a few notes on a trumpet. Light streamed out of the unshut-

tered windows onto the neglected garden below, fringed mimosa leaves faintly caught the light, and oranges and lemons glowed against dark leaves so that they resembled one of the Douanier Rousseau's forests. A startled white cat, with its tail held high, ran away into the night. Flora stood watching for a few minutes, then she heard the heavy fall of a passing 'sereno's' staff on the pavement and thought, 'He'll start talking if I continue to stand here like a nit-wit.' She turned the corner, entered the house and became part of the party.

At first she did not see Parker. The room was so crowded and her attention was taken by the bubbles from some patent bubble-blower, which a young man with a pointed beard was showering all over the room. He was standing on a chair and another man was trying to pull him down and several girls were joining in, crying: "Oh, Paul, you fool! Do get down. They are bursting on the sandwiches and in our drinks." She heard an elderly English voice say: "The name Windsor always reminds me of a particularly unpleasant soup. Such a pity!" A youngish man, wearing a hairy jacket, came up to her with a glass of red wine in his hand. He asked if he could get her a drink, which she refused because she was still holding the bottle of Tio Pepe, although she had shed her coat in the hall. Suddenly Parker was there, demanding: "Why are you so late? I thought you would be here early to help." He took the bottle from her and steered her through the room into the studio, where dancing was in progress, then into the kitchen. He kicked the door to and took her in his arms. "If only all these people would go!" he whispered into her hair. "You'll come tomorrow, won't you?"

"I shall come tomorrow," she answered. "Nothing can stop me." Inside she said: 'Forgive me, Leo. I can't help myself. It is as if I was under a spell.'

When they emerged from the kitchen the bubble-blowing was over. A young Spaniard wearing dark glasses was play-

ing a guitar, but no one was listening. The main excitement besides the dancing was a long and slender girl with flowing hair demonstrating a hula-hoop and an American serviceman who had arrived with a tortoise as a New Year's gift for Parker. Flora walked among the guests with a plate of 'tapas' in each hand, Parker following with a tray filled with glasses of wine. "Here, do something with this," he ordered the man with the hairy jacket; then went straight up to the girl with the hula-hoop, saying: "Let me have a go at that. I've been wanting to for weeks." He took the hoop and slipped it over his shoulders. 'Oh, dear! He's going to make a fool of himself' was Flora's worried reaction, as she stood with a dish in either hand. Far from it! The scarlet hoop whirled round Parker's agile blue body in an effortless manner. When it showed signs of swirling to his knees, by some deft movement it would rise up towards his armpits. The guests stood round uttering admiring exclamations until Parker, completely unconcerned, stopped the swirling hoop, remarking: "I thought it would be easy, and it is."

Leo arrived shortly after the hula-hoop demonstration and Flora supplied him with an unsatisfactory meal of 'tapas' and rolls filled with various garlicky sausages. They leant against the wall studying their fellow guests, quite a number of whom Flora had met before, though she knew very little about them and could not even remember their names. Two men who were standing near were discussing a very good-looking boy who was sitting by an open window with a trumpet across his knee. One said spitefully: "Must he always bring his trumpet with him?" and the other replied in a dead voice: "Yes. Otherwise he would lose his lip." Flora whispered: "Did you hear that? How sad and strange!" As they watched and listened it seemed as if two parties were in progress, the guests were so divided. The young ones mostly congregated in the studio, where dancing and a certain

amount of love-making were taking place; they only appeared in the other room for refreshments or intense talk—atomic warfare, Franco's future, American poetry, painting and the lesser known Greek Islands seemed to be popular subjects. The older guests appeared to be lonely, washed-up members of the British colony who had nowhere else to go. Flora was sure she had caught a glimpse of the bread-eating old lady from the Institute with her claw-like hand hovering over a plate of 'tapas'. A brittle woman with a face like a faded daisy came up and spoke to them. She said she worked in a bookshop where only the best people bought books and that she was suffering from heart trouble. When Flora said she hoped she did not find her work too tiring, she sadly replied: "But what has that to do with love?"

Several men asked Flora to dance, but she always refused because the dancing appeared to be so strenuous, quite different from the way she and Leo used to dance. Hairy Jacket came and attached himself to them and said that he had first come to Barcelona as a traveller in feathers but the bottom had fallen out of feathers and he had now become an art photographer. Just as Flora was becoming interested in his story Parker appeared like a jack-in-the-box. "The grapes," he hissed, "the grapes! Has anyone done anything about them? It's almost twelve o'clock." "What grapes?" Flora asked. "No one said anything about grapes to me." Then a large girl with legs like beer-bottles loomed up. She bounced up to Parker, the light gleaming on her spectacles, exclaiming: "They are all ready except that we are short of plates. Would saucers do?" Exasperated, Parker snarled: "Christ, yes! This isn't the Avenida Palace. But hurry. It's about five to twelve, so you had better start serving them out." Mystified, Flora followed the large girl into the kitchen. She's a bit like a Renoir girl blown up with a bicycle pump, she thought. Her mother, a cheerful, matronly

woman, was picking over bunches of grapes and arranging them twelve at a time on saucers and plates. "They are good for this time of the year," she remarked brightly in a strong Scots accent. The Renoir girl started to disarrange the plates. "I'm adding a few onions," she giggled. "Perhaps you would hand them round." So Flora rushed pushing plates that contained twelve grapes and an odd onion into her fellow-guests' hands. Then a clock which she had never seen before started to strike twelve and the guests crammed grapes into their mouths, sometimes spluttering exclamations like "Hell, I've got an onion!" or: "These skins! I'll never make it." Flora, ramming grapes down her throat, noticed that Leo was slowly and methodically peeling his and he had only managed to eat three before the clock ceased to chime. Choking over her skins, she spluttered: "Do you think it is something to do with happy months?"

SIX

THE PORTERO WORE a jacket with a fur collar as well as the beret perched on his bald head. He sat behind his counter like a large bird of prey, and shouted at the children if they used the lift too frequently or played in the hall; but he kissed the babies. One morning Flora found she could not use the lift. It appeared to have become jammed two floors below. The marble staircase echoed with women's harsh voices as she descended and, when she reached the sixth floor, she thought she had become involved in a wedding party. The landing was swarming with women and children. In the lift a yellow-haired woman was being supported by several other women and seemed to be the centre of attention. She managed to push her way gently through the crowd and ran down the other flights of stairs, the women's voices echoing after her. By the time Flora reached the hall women were streaming through the glass and wrought-iron doors into the street, the portero and his wife following them. Then Flora realized that the woman she had mistaken for a bride was a highly pregnant woman whom she had seen coming in and out of the building for the last five months, always appearing to be in the last stages of pregnancy and leaning heavily on an older woman's arm. Now, as she crossed the street with women helping her on either side, she gave little cries of "Ol, Oi!" and the women following gave cries of sympathy and encouragement. Quite a crowd gathered as she was helped into a taxi, shop-

keepers even leaving their shops; but she never smiled and, even when she drove away, her face was set in a mask of despair. But she is happy really, Flora thought. If only it could be me driving away to have a child, a living one.

In spite of the portero's fur-collared jacket January was mild and sunny, very similar to an English October—the golden days that sometimes come then. Men still sat over aperitifs in pavement bars, although most of the larger ones were closed in for the winter. The postmen wore dark-blue woollen suits, like London postmen, instead of the washed-out blue-grey cotton ones they had worn when Flora and Leo first arrived in Barcelona. 'When the leaves begin to show on the trees again and the postmen change their suits, it will be the first sign of summer,' Flora mused. 'In London, besides the leaves, it is the fringed canopies of babies' prams and the cherries on costers' barrows and the white covers on busmen's hats.'

She walked in the January sun, stopping from time to time to study shop windows. She was amused by the large displays of plastic oddities on view, most of them extremely vulgar and fussy, yet having a sort of innocent charm. The exquisitely embroidered children's clothes always held her attention and the shops that sold shoes with stiletto heels and pointed toes, shoes of all colours and gold and silver sandals. She said to herself, 'Spanish women can be as charming and feminine as they like without being considered vulgar. I shall wear golden sandals in the street this summer and put Joya scent on my hair if I can afford it.' She walked towards the Paseo de Gracia to collect a suit of Leo's from the cleaners. An old white horse went lumbering past drawing an extraordinary black van, a sort of black-maria-hansom-cab, which contained a solitary nun, the bells on the horse's harness jangling above the other street sounds. Mothers and maids were bringing solemn-eyed children home from school for their mid-day meal, the little girls often wearing stiff white collars

60

over their dark school dresses, plastic perhaps. Most of the children, boys or girls, wore sailor coats; but when Flora saw them playing on their roofs they were usually dressed in striped overalls. Dogs barked from balconies where carnations still bloomed; the sound of radio music came from open windows, and groups of girls gathered round the windows of the 'pastelerias' gazing at the fabulous cakes and sweets displayed. A passing taxi suddenly caught Flora's attention. She noticed someone waving from a window and for a moment thought it was some stranger until she realized it was John; but a beardless John. She caught a glimpse of the girl beside him, of a lovely white face glowing against almost black hair, and knew it must be Meg. The taxi was soon swallowed up in the flowing traffic, but she thought it was heading towards Rosellon, where the attic studio was situated.

When Flora returned home, she unobtrusively looked from her window towards that of the 'Atico Artists', and she continued to do this at intervals for the rest of the day. She did not catch sight of John or Meg. Five flower-pots, containing geraniums, appeared on the balcony; but that was all. When Leo left for his evening classes, she spent an hour listening to the sound of the lift bumping up and down. Each time it stopped on her landing and she heard the doors crash open she rushed to the front door waiting for the bell to ring, always to be disappointed. By eight o'clock she could bear the suspense no longer and decided to visit Parker.

She had not seen him since the week-end. On her last visit he had been in a bad mood because he considered he had been underpaid for some work he had undertaken for a large shoe-shop. "Forty-eight plaster feet, in twelve different sizes! The work that went into those bloody feet! And they send me this miserable cheque. Getting money from Spaniards is like getting shit off a blanket." Flora had not stayed long after this outburst, and she hoped that by this time the

meanness of Spanish businessmen would be forgotten.

When she reached Parker's studio she could hear voices, English ones, and there was an appetizing smell of freshly fried onions in the hall. She called, but there was no answer; so she opened the door and saw Parker sitting at the table surrounded by dishes, which was usual at this time of the evening. There were also two guests, which was also usual; but, when they turned round as she entered the room, she saw that they were Meg and John. Her first reaction was that Parker should have invited her as well. Then it occurred to her that the meal was probably spontaneous and that in any case she always refused to eat with Parker because of having a meal at home later. At least she would meet Meg, which she had been longing to do all day. Parker, with a forkful of food in mid-air, exclaimed: "Hallo! I wasn't expecting you," and Flora, who had just closed the door behind her, mumbled in a bleak little voice: "Oh! Shall I go away?" But, before Parker could answer, John left the table and, taking her by the hand, said: "Flora, how lovely to see you! Now you can meet Meg. Meg, this is Flora Elliot, a very special friend of mine and Parker's."

The introduction over, Parker said: "Come, sit down and don't stand there dithering. If you won't eat anything, at least you can drink a glass of wine." In spite of his abrupt manner of speaking, he smiled in a friendly way, so she sat at the table, accepted a glass of wine and nibbled a thin stick of bread, glancing at Meg from time to time. Meg was an exceptionally good-looking, well-built girl, with a beautiful white neck and graceful movements. When she laughed or drank her wine her lovely throat was seen at its best advantage and Flora watched her with fascinated admiration. She had seen from photographs that Meg was handsome, but she had not expected a beauty. She appeared to be a completely unaffected, friendly girl, very much in love with John, who

was almost speechless with happiness. Flora did not stay long; but before she left she had invited the young Wyndhams to luncheon for the following Sunday. She knew that Leo would resent having his free day interrupted by the arrival of guests; but it was the only day without afternoon pupils and she thought, 'I can't entertain people with "No. 1 is a chair, No. 2 is a man" going on, and Leo likes John.'

When Leo returned from work that evening, she hurried into the hall to meet him, exclaiming: "Leo, I've met Meg! She's beautiful, really beautiful in a Mrs William Morris way and so friendly and unspoilt." In a broken croak he replied: "I don't know who Meg is," as he dejectedly hung his black hat on a peg. "Oh, your voice has gone again," she said flatly. Leo struggling out of his heavy coat replied irritably: "What can you expect after ten hours' intensive teaching?" then added: "I'm sorry, darling. Perhaps my voice will improve with a drink. You can tell me about this pre-Raphaelite beauty as I have one." 'Or two or three,' Flora said to herself as she put the bottles out. She waited until the second drink was almost finished before mentioning the arrangements she had made for Sunday. He took it better than she had hoped, saying:

"Sunday is the only time I get to read. But I suppose we must see people sometimes. It must be dreadfully lonely for you. That's one of the things I worry about, that and the blasted rent. However hard I work I only just manage to clear it. If we hadn't a little money coming from England, it would be impossible to manage."

"Do you think it would be a good idea if I taught a little?" she asked doubtfully.

"Good heavens, no! It would be ghastly two of us teaching, and in any case you don't know enough Spanish. These private pupils are always letting me down. They book twelve lessons, then leave after about three and say they are going

to Madrid. That's their stock excuse when they find they can't learn a language without a certain amount of study. Don't worry, we'll manage somehow. Actually there is a slight chance I may get some translating work, but don't count on it." Then, holding his hand towards her: "I'm sorry I'm such a misery. It won't be like this always." Flora held his long, cold hand against her face for a moment. When she went towards the kitchen there were tears upon her face.

John and Meg's visit to the flat turned out much better than she had expected. Leo seemed genuinely pleased to see them. His voice had recovered and he was in a really good mood—in what Flora called a 'London mood'. For once the kitchen chimney failed to smoke, the Valencia rice did not become soggy, and the rather inferior meat she had braised with pimento and chestnuts was marvellously tender. Meg was a charming guest, complimenting Flora on the little things she had done to improve the flat, asking her advice on household matters, gently drawing Leo out so that he was laughing and talking more than anyone. He told amusing stories about some of his teaching experiences, incidents that he had never mentioned to Flora. He also talked about the women writers he had had to entertain when he worked with the publishers: how one kept demanding more and more drink and eventually became completely drunk and had to be taken home; how several of them had insisted on telling him the entire histories of their unhappy marriages; and how one had arrived for a luncheon appointment with her three children, all under five. Flora had heard these stories before, but was pleased to hear them again and see Leo so happy and relaxed. She watched him, thinking that she had forgotten how he used to be and how handsome he looked when he smiled.

When they had finished their coffee, Meg mentioned how much she wanted to visit Mont Juich, which she could see from the studio windows; so John suggested they took a taxi

to the Plaza de España and walked towards the fort. They found a taxi parked outside the block of flats. The driver appeared to have gone to sleep over a paper-backed translation of *Oliver Twist*; but he opened one eye when he heard their voices and opened the other when Leo told him where to drive to. They got out by the air terminal and joined the Sunday crowds climbing the steps towards the Palacio. As it was all new to Meg, she was wildly enthusiastic, wanting to visit the Spanish Village, the museums and art galleries, the gardens and the skating rink; but eventually, to her companions' relief, a walk was agreed upon and they climbed up and up, every now and again stopping to admire the amazing views spread below. They saw a distant beach and lighthouse, looking like a little mirage simmering in the afternoon sun, and, at another turn, Barcelona under its silvery haze, and the docks, stark and darkly beautiful. The fort at close quarters they considered disappointing and far better seen from below; and to Flora it was as if the brown ghosts of the hundreds of men who had been killed there were stalking reproachfully. As they walked down they heard the rumble of roller-skates and looked down on the rink, where boys and girls circled like swallows on a summer evening. A woman passed with a live lovebird perched on her hat and another on her shoulder; another woman, as if not to be outdone, walked behind with a monkey on a lead. A sudden wind sprang up and they hurried down through the formal gardens towards the Palacio, all declaring how much they had enjoyed the walk and making vague plans to do it again.

Flora did not see Meg as frequently as she had expected because she had taken Brian's place in the studio, working there several hours a day; but she sometimes met her at Parker's. He was modelling her head and shoulders, and Flora found herself feeling faintly jealous when she saw Parker's hands shaping that lovely head and neck. He appeared to be

almost caressing it as he worked, particularly the throat. 'I never realized a neck, which is just a sort of human isthmus, could be so beautiful,' she said to herself rather sadly. 'Mine is like a fading flower stem.' Sometimes she felt Parker almost resented her presence when Meg was there. One evening, when Meg rushed away to cook John's dinner, Flora remarked how pleasant she was, as well as being beautiful, and Parker answered: "Yes. She's far too good for John." Surprised, Flora said that no one was too good for John. Another time, a Saturday evening when John had gone to a football match, Parker sadly shook his head when he heard how John was spending his time and said ruefully: "It's a pity about John. Games rot the mind. You might as well pour vitriol on your brain. I'm afraid that boy will never come to anything." Meg was present and Flora waited for her to rush to John's defence; but she only laughed and said: "No more of your Parkerisms, please." But there were more Parkerisms and nearly always at John's expense. One evening Flora asked where the tortoise was and Parker replied that he had given it to Meg because, contrasted to the tortoise, John wouldn't seem so slow. Flora, who was laying the table, threw down the knives and forks, exclaiming angrily: "Why are you always so spiteful about John?" Parker laughed. "Oh, John's a nice enough young man, good-looking too; but slow and lacking in character. Meg's wasted on him. He would have been just as happy with any pretty girl. He's incapable of appreciating a girl like Meg." When Flora violently disagreed, Parker cried: "Stop, for heaven's sake stop! You're being a bore and it's nothing to do with you anyway. Come here, you silly little thing and let me make love to you." In spite of her resentment, as if hypnotized, she walked towards him. He undid her blouse and gently kissed her shoulders and drew her towards the divan. "Love me, love me," she whispered. "Nothing else matters."

SEVEN

"LEO, YOU ARE drinking too much. I don't think you realize how much you get through in a day."

"As long as I don't appear drunk while I'm teaching, I can't see it matters how much I drink."

"But of course it matters. It can't be good for you. Besides giving you cirrhosis of the liver there is something awfully frightening about it. Sometimes in the evening your speech is all blurred and, when you stand up, I can see you swaying."

"I sway, do I? I'm sorry about the swaying. But you can't think how tired I get. If I didn't drink I'd never get through all my classes. Now my wretched voice is giving out just when I need it most. Taking on two schools and four private pupils is too much, I suppose. I'll cut down the drink, though. You are quite right. It's only a temporary help and I feel even worse when the effect has worn off." He put down his empty glass, buttoned up his overcoat, kissed his wife and, with his briefcase in his hand, left the flat to face another three hours' teaching. When Flora heard the lift descending, she adjusted her face and hair, and a few minutes later left the flat herself.

In spite of the alcohol he consumed Leo was always the first to awake in the morning, usually leaving the squeaking and vibrating bed before Flora opened her eyes. Bemused with sleep, she would hear the splash of water coming from the bathroom, then the sound of Leo brushing the suit he

had worn the previous day. He never wore the same suit on consecutive days. Then, if she had not already crawled out of bed by this stage of the morning, she would see an agitated husband bending over the bed, saying: "You must get up now, you are lying on my trousers." He had left his trouser-press behind in England and had to press his trousers under the mattress. Early-morning sun creeping through the kitchen window and the smell of percolating coffee would cause Flora's spirits to rise and she would think: 'Perhaps something special will happen today. I'll suddenly be able to speak Spanish fluently or a letter with some perfectly astounding news will arrive.' She would look across the street at the 20th Century building; but there were few pink and blue pigeons there now. There were no strange cries from the old woman who used to feed them. She had died and the bowls that used to contain water for the birds were dry and dirty.

While they ate their breakfast Flora and Leo hardly spoke. Leo would say in a dead voice: "Will you have some fruit?" and Flora would mumble: "Yes" or "No" or "More coffee?" Sometimes she would think, 'He knows about Parker, he must, or he wouldn't be so quiet and sort of reproachful. In that case why doesn't he turn me out of the flat? Perhaps he will before long.' She would swallow her coffee in nervous gulps, looking at him out of the sides of her eyes, while he looked out of the window with an unseeing gaze. She remembered how the mornings used to be in that far-off London life, Leo inquiring with loving solicitude how she was going to spend the day, with the unexpectedly warm smile which transformed his face; Poker curled up in his basket and the Siamese cat with narrowed blue eyes waiting for the remains of the warm milk; the letters they would open and discuss—"Two parties in one evening would be a bit much. Shall we refuse the Jacksons' invitation?" or "Here's an invitation to a private view of Edward's paintings. We

must go to that; perhaps we could have luncheon together and go on afterwards. We could try out that new Greek restaurant everyone says is so good"—the torn envelopes decorated by the Queen's neat little head strewn on the breakfast table; the loving parting and the last view of Leo's upright well-dressed figure vanishing into the misty London morning. Now Flora would say: "Hurry, Leo! I can hear 'Wooden shoes and happy hearts' coming through the walls. It means you're late." Leo, stuffing books into his brief-case, would exclaim: "Blast, I'm late again! You must have breakfast ready earlier." That flat door would slam and he would be gone, more often than not forgetting to give his wife a perfunctory peck on the cheek before leaving.

Some mornings Flora would attack the housework in a fury, sweeping the tiled floors with her witch-like broom and, if there was enough water, scrubbing the soiled shirts and sheets as if they were her enemies. Before she went on the roof to hang out the laundry, she listened for footsteps above. If it was silent, she struggled up the single flight of stairs with her heavy bucket of wet clothes to hang them on the clothes-lines as soon as possible. Her washing did not have the professional look of the other flapping linen and she often hung handkerchiefs and tea-cloths over the bad places—the pillow-case marked with lipstick, the rather grimy patch in the centre of the sheets, the table-cloth with the wine stain. Even the way she hung her linen lacked the neat precision of the other lines. She used to fill her mouth with clothes-pegs like a dressmaker with pins. The wind made the sheets unmanageable and in her haste she often dropped them, but she was seldom quick enough to escape being caught by some garrulous woman. There was one in particular who was most friendly, but unfortunately a great shouter. Whenever she saw Flora being blown about on that windy roof she would rush at her yelling: "Hola!" and giving her friendly pats.

Then there would be the questions: why was her husband so thin, was he ill? and, did she like Spain? England was very wet, dark and cold, wasn't it? Where was her husband working and was her fair hair natural? Flora understood about half of what was being shouted at her and always came away feeling she had been exposed to an earthquake. She quite enjoyed using her Spanish in the lift because she knew that time was limited; but the roof conversations terrified her.

In spite of her limited Spanish she always rushed to the door when she heard the bell ring. Almost inevitably it turned out to be the 'vigilante' calling for his monthly tip; nuns with little note-books, the 'cobrador' collecting money for the water-rate. Ironically this man always appeared on waterless days. Sometimes it would be Flat-red-face or Beaky-nose, the postmen. Beaky-nose used to be rather unpleasant until she discovered that the postmen expected a small tip for delivering letters. This she gave gladly because she imagined it would result in more letters from England; also she preferred them brought to the flat because if the letters were left in the hall the portero would pore over them, retiring to his little cubby hole behind the counter to do so. Flora, who was long-sighted, used to observe him through a crack by the hinges of the door. He examined each letter in turn, even holding them to his long nose as if to smell the enclosed words.

Occasionally he kept letters back for days. Flora loathed the portero and wished he were kept in the usual glassed-off lodge instead of sitting behind a counter, peering into shopping baskets and being insolent to visitors. Above his head was a looking-glass placed so that he could see people as they entered the front door. When Flora entered the building, her eyes always turned towards this glass and, if his bald head was not visible, she knew the coast was clear and would hurry to the lift and hastily close the door. Often, before she had time to start the lift in motion, the doors would burst open again and

the portero's heavy, sallow face would be thrust into the compartment for a moment before the lift was allowed to ascend. He was susceptible to visiting pretty faces and, whenever Meg called, he insisted on accompanying her to the Elliots' flat, even ringing the bell for her and waiting at her side until the bell was answered.

Meg came to see Flora one morning to tell her they had found a partly-furnished flat in the Calle de Tallers. "It's frightfully cheap, only eight hundred a month, and perfectly charming. I'm on my way there now and wondered if you'd care to see it." Nothing could have appealed to Flora more and they set off together immediately. It was Parker who had found them the flat, which had recently been vacated by a young sculptor whom he sometimes used as an assistant. It was situated in an old house near the end of the 'calle', and consisted of one very large room with a narrow balcony which looked onto the street, a kitchen with two holes for burning charcoal, and a strange lavatory. Meg opened the door, which led straight into the living-room, with an enormous iron key. Then, as soon as Flora had seen the rest of the flat, she produced from her basket a small flower-pot with a red daisy growing in it and placed it on the balcony, remarking that she hoped to get at least twelve pots on it in time. A heavy earthenware bowl was the next thing to appear. "It's really meant for cooking, but I shall use it for fruit, it's such a graceful shape," she explained as she placed it on the only table. "This table is to be painted blue; so don't see it as it is, just imagine it blue," she said happily. There were three plates decorated with eccentric cocks with flowing tails and combs like crowns, and these were put in the kitchen, which had a huge chimney jutting out into the room. "We shall both hit our heads on the mantelpiece when we are cooking, but it's worth it. It's so attractive. I think you are supposed to hang a gingham frill on it."

"The whole flat is beautiful," Flora said wistfully. "Much nicer than ours and so cheap. I think you'll be awfully happy here in spite of a few discomforts."

"Oh, discomforts! They are nothing. I'm sure Parker will let us have baths at his flat, and I'm longing to cook on those charcoal things—Eduardo is going to show me how to cook quite a lot of Spanish dishes." They returned to the main room, which had a divan with a straw mattress with a queer smell, not exactly dirty, but mouldy. Meg bounced on it for a moment and said brightly: "This divan won't be at all bad when the mattress has been aired; we just need a couple of pillows and a blanket or two and a cover—a crimson one would be nice. Visitors could sit on the divan, so we only need two chairs to start with." She darted about the flat, remarking excitedly: "Just look at the sun on the balcony. I think we'll have it most of the morning," or: "Don't you think these old red tiles on the floor are beautiful? It's a pity some of them are missing. There's a marvellous tile shop below. Have you seen it?" Flora occasionally managed to get in a few words of admiration. As they were leaving and walking down the dark and dirty staircase, she said nervously, fumbling with her gloves: "Meg, you and John have everything to make a happy marriage. You won't let anything spoil it?"

"What on earth do you mean?" Meg asked sharply.

"I don't mean anything really; it's just that you and John are so well suited to each other and so much in love. It would be wonderful if you could keep it like that," Flora answered, still struggling with her gloves and wishing she had held her tongue. "It's so easy for marriages to go wrong," and she added sadly, "but so hard to put them right again."

They walked out of the house together in a strained silence. Instinctively they both turned towards the tile-shop, which was open-fronted to the street, and were soon exclaiming how attractive the tiles were. It proved impossible for Meg to leave

without buying two with fishermen on them. "There goes the money for the frying pan," she said ruefully as they started to walk home. It was such a clear and sunny day that they decided it was hardly worth using the underground railway. As they walked up Balmes, Meg said: "What is this word 'guapa' I'm always hearing?" Flora, laughing, answered: "It just means that you are beautiful."

As they were parting outside Flora's block of flats Meg asked: "Will you be at Parker's tonight? He has asked me to type some letters for him. He has been such a good friend to us that I'm very pleased when I can do something in return. Don't you think he is rather a wonderful person?" Flora agreed, but said she would not be in the studio that evening. Meg said it was a pity; then, as she was turning to go, she added: "I hope Parker's fans won't be there. I don't really care for them, do you?" Flora laughed. "Well, some are better than others, but I hardly know them because the only time they speak to me is to ask if I have a spare room." They stood laughing for a few moments together; then Flora went into the hall.

The portero and his wife—or was it his mother?—were sitting side by side behind the high counter, their large faces just showing above it, looking slightly obscene, like figures in a Turkish bath or heads to be shied at at fairs. They handed Flora a letter as she passed. She recognized her sister Ann's writing and the slight uneasiness caused by Meg's remarks about Parker lifted. As soon as she entered the flat she opened the letter, slowly walking towards the sitting-room as she read. The letter was to tell her that Ann was intending to marry a widowed doctor, the father of two children. The marriage was to take place in a few weeks, on the Thursday before Easter. Ann had written: "Although I'm nearly forty, I'm very much in love, actually for the first time in my life. The only thing that spoils my happiness is that you will not

be at my wedding. I suppose it would be too difficult for you to leave Leo; but, if it could be managed, I would be able to help with the fare. Flora dear, we all miss you so much, do come if you can."

She stood by the window with the letter in her hand, imagining being with her sisters again—the wedding, London, the old friends she would meet, the shops and theatres. Then she thought of the joy of talking to her sisters after these lonely months, of all they would have to tell each other. It was then that she knew it would be impossible for her to go. How could she face her family with the disastrous figure of Parker between them? 'Sometimes I hate him,' she said to herself bitterly. But it was not only the sailor-like figure of Parker that separated her from her sisters. There was Leo, poor Leo with his worn-out face. She could not leave him alone in Barcelona to return to an empty flat, an unmade bed, and an empty larder, with drink his only consolation. 'Not that I'm much of a consolation,' she thought sadly, 'but at least he's not likely to drink so much if I'm there, and I do cook his meals and wash and iron shirts. Even if I am a bad wife, I'm quite a useful one. But how we have deteriorated in the last few months! It's unbelievable.' She vaguely looked round the room at the dark-green walls hung with paintings of dead animals, the heavy, varnished furniture and stuffy curtains and wondered how it had come about, the deterioration of two fairly normal, happy people. 'The baby dying may have been the seed of the trouble, although we seem to have got over that more or less—at least Leo has, and I only feel sad about it sometimes. No, the real trouble must be my lonely empty days in this boring flat, where I'm not allowed to do anything, and Leo's overwork and poor health. He seems to be in a far worse state than he was in England. It would have been better to have stayed there and faced the fogs and now we will never have the energy to return. An awful sort of

apathy seems to have come over us. Parker's love-making is the only thing that stirs me, and with Leo it's drink.' She put Ann's letter down on the table, placing an orange on it so that it would not blow away, and went into the kitchen to prepare luncheon. In spite of his late hours of work Leo insisted on having his main meal at night and it was usually past eleven when they ate it. 'It's things like that make me so impatient with him. I didn't mind it in London, late hours or anything else he wanted.'

When Leo returned, she read Ann's letter to him, leaving out any mention of her own presence at the wedding. Leo, shaking off the slight irritation caused by noticing his wife's use of an orange as a paper-weight when there was a perfectly good iron one provided by the landlord, listened to Flora's gentle voice reading her sister's letter and became quite interested in her news, which resulted in an almost animated conversation about a present to send. As they sat over their coffee, Leo said: "If you want to go to Ann's wedding, we could afford it if you travelled by train. It's funny she didn't suggest it, but our money is due about then."

Flora, surprised and touched, impulsively rushed to Leo and kissing him, exclaimed: "Oh my darling, how kind of you to suggest such a thing!" Then, seeing his rather startled expression, calmed herself: "It wouldn't be a good idea really, not when we need the money so badly, and I wouldn't feel happy about leaving you alone." Then, brightly: "I say, couldn't we spend the money on getting a better flat? I believe you can get unfurnished ones if you pay a year's rent in advance. Leo, let's advertise for one as soon as the money arrives. We could have one with a balcony or even a small garden and have our furniture sent out, and I . . ." Leo laughed: "Please stop, darling. I know you find it depressing living here, but we can't possibly move as things are. Later, perhaps, if I can pick up enough translating." Then, noticing

the clamped-down look on his wife's face, he added: "We will be able to have a holiday though, I'm practically sure of that. I'll take you anywhere you like on the Costa Brava, or we might even manage the Baleares." Flora gave a crooked smile. "That would be lovely. I'll get some travel books from the library and we can read them together. Do you remember how we used to read about Spain at home? I imagined it so different."

Leo glanced at his watch and hurriedly stood up exclaiming: "It's three o'clock already and there's a pupil arriving any minute. Quick, I'll help clear the table."

'No. 1 is a chair, No. 2 is a table,' etc., etc., and so the day passed.

EIGHT

EASTER CAME EARLY that year, while the March winds were still tearing through the streets and ripping at the laundry waving on the roofs. Parker was taking Meg and John to Seville for Holy Week; but there had been no suggestion that Flora and Leo should accompany them. "Even if Parker had asked us, you couldn't have managed to get away for a whole week, could you, Leo?" Flora asked in a small, dejected voice; and Leo answered that he certainly couldn't and that, if they ever did visit Seville, he hoped they would travel alone. "I dislike Parker intensely and always have," he added as he brushed his sedate black hat. "I can't think why it is that my hat blows off at least twice a day in these winds; I never see other men's hats doing the same." Flora observed crossly: "Perhaps you haven't noticed that Spaniards hardly ever wear hats," then added: "Quick, Leo, 'Happy hearts and wooden shoes' has just started on the next-door wireless."

The customary peck, the carefully closed door, the sound of the lift bumping down and the shrill singing of all the birds who lived in little cages down the lift shaft. The passing lift seemed to act as a signal for them to start singing. Flora was alone with her boredom and discontent. She opened the sitting-room window and absent-mindedly picked dead leaves from the windswept geraniums, crumbling them between her fingers as she watched a man pulling bales of cloth through a tiny square hole cut into a low roof. He carried

the cloth away in a bundle on his head and proceeded to hang it on wooden racks which had recently been erected on another roof for that purpose. Forgetting her depression, Flora watched him pulling more and more bales of cloth of all colours, like flabby snakes, and flinging them deftly onto the racks. The material did not appear to be wet and she wondered what the reason was for exposing it to the gritty wind. Strains of Bing Crosby singing 'The Easter Parade' were blown in through the window. 'At least we won't be hearing "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas" for about eight months,' she reflected as she turned away and went into the bedroom to dress for shopping. 'I musn't think of Easter,' she resolved as she sat at her dressing-table and saw her dejected face reflected in the speckled glass. 'I must concentrate on Ann's wedding. In three more days she will be married to her doctor and will become a step-mother as well as a wife and I shall have two step-nephews. She may even have children of her own.' A sudden blare of "I'll wear an Easter bonnet" came through the wall. Flora flung her hairbrush across the room and shouted: "Blast you and your Easter bonnet! I hate Easter."

The unhappiness that had been slowly mounting for the last few weeks suddenly came to a head and was pouring out like lava from a volcano. In her heart she knew that Parker was tiring of her, and there had been something almost brutal about his love-making, a sort of ruthless boredom. They no longer lay in each other's arms relaxed and content. Parker would yawn, look at his watch and even suggest it was time she went home. On her last visit to the studio he lay on the divan looking at her with an amused, yet contemptuous expression on his face as she self-consciously struggled with her suspender-belt. When she had dressed, she had sat down beside him and, taking his rather short fingers in hers, had shyly asked if he still loved her. Parker had frowned, then patted

her absent-mindedly with his disengaged hand and said: "Love! Women think of nothing but love. Of course I'm fond of you, but don't pin me down and become all possessive. You're inclined to be a bit that way, you know. If you want to smother anyone, try it on your husband. He looks as if he could do with a bit of love and attention, poor chap."

"Aren't you jealous of him?" Flora asked in a trembling voice.

"Jealous of Leo? Good God, no! Pull yourself together, my dear. You'll ruin things between us if you go on like this. By the way, you had better not come to the studio before I leave for Seville. I shall be pretty busy one way and another. But I'll come round to the flat to say goodbye." Then he kissed her affectionately and cheered her by suggesting modelling her head on his return. "I'm thinking of having an exhibition and it wouldn't be complete without a portrait of you." He stroked her golden floss of hair, patted her cheek and five minutes later she found herself in the street on her way home.

It was a little after six and the light had gone dead in the streets. The temporary rise in Flora's spirits left her as soon as Parker had firmly shut the door on her. 'I'll stroke your pretty hair and model your pretty face, but for heaven's sake get out of my sight. Am I imagining it or is it true? Of course it's true. Oh, how humiliating!' She found herself praying in the greyness: 'God, please help me never to go to his studio again! I must be proud, I must be proud.' Two nuns passed her. They walked against a yellow wall. Two nuns—one for joy, two for sorrow. Or is it crows they say that about? Help me to be proud, God, and I'll be a better wife although I'll never be a good one again.' So she had bargained with God, which left her feeling a little comforted and strengthened.

Now, before her looking-glass, she remembered these

resolves and forced herself to pick up her hairbrush and to wash the tears from her face. As she left the building she even spoke to her enemy the portero.

"Buenos dias."

"Buenos dias."

"¿Hay cartas para mi?"

"No. Nada para Usted."

Then she tried a little conversation with the woman in the 'Granja' as she handed a gin bottle over the counter to be filled with milk. The woman's white arms were so fat that the fat appeared to be fluid under the skin and strange unexpected lumps and ripples appeared as she moved. Flora, who liked the dairy woman, always tried to keep her eyes away from those arms. The spotless white overall, combined with the smell of milk, seemed to make them even more morbidly fascinating. Flora admired the two little birds which hung in separate cages over the counter and the dairy woman admired Flora's English pleated skirt; then they discussed the weather and Flora left the shop thinking that her Spanish was not so bad after all. 'I'll work at my "Hugo's" and write in my diary again, it's weeks since I wrote anything in it.' And then she remembered why she had ceased to write. 'I couldn't put down the truth,' she said to herself. 'A diary is no good if it isn't true. Well, I can put down the truth from now on, but the main thing is my Spanish, I must study hard, and then there's the laundry, I'm always behind with that. As soon as I get home, I'll face all those laundry women on the roof and wash the entire contents of the laundry basket, including those odd things that always get left at the bottom because I mean to have a go at them next week. I'll fill my days with work until I'm too tired to think. The evenings when I used to see him will be the worst. Four lonely hours to kill. Even if my Spanish improved I couldn't talk to the other women in the flats because their husbands and children are at home then.

Perhaps I'll save the washing and ironing until the evening, it's wonderfully exhausting."

It was the Monday following Palm Sunday and many of the balconies were decorated with sprays of palm twisted into symbolic and decorative shapes, which would soon become thickly coated with cement-coloured dust. Flora thought how well they would sell in Peter Jones on the ground floor and how most people who bought them would have no idea what the palm represented: "Some kind of basket-work, my dear, but so decorative!"

When she got home she found Meg and the portero standing outside her door. "Thank heaven you have saved me from that man! I thought he was never going. Does he always accompany your visitors to your doorstep?" Meg asked. "Only the pretty ones," Flora laughed as she unlocked the door.

When they were in the living-room Meg walked to the window and said: "Do you mind if I open it? I want to have a look at John working in the studio and see if I can catch his eye." She leant out of the window and waved a green head-scarf she had been wearing; then turned to Flora to say quite sadly: "No, only Eduardo appears to be there."

"You will see him at lunchtime, won't you?" Flora asked, touched by Meg's devotion to her husband.

"I wanted to see him while I was here," Meg said vaguely as she sat on the arm of a chair, picking at the worn material with one finger. She looked down for a moment, murmuring: "Ghastly stuff, isn't it? Are they meant to be tulips or roses?" Then suddenly: "I want you to do something for me. Well, it isn't exactly something you have to do—it's just a very small lie I'd like you to tell if necessary. You see, I want John to think we have gone to the cinema together, that small one in Provenza. I told him we might be going. Don't look so surprised. It's just that I need an evening alone,

to sort things out in my mind. Don't you ever feel like that? "

"I wouldn't know. You see I have so much time alone, far too much." Flora looked at Meg intently for a moment, then glanced across the room at the dreary green wall before bringing herself to say: "Meg, you're different. You seem sort of nervy and unsettled. You are not unhappy, are you? "

Meg laughed. "Of course I'm not unhappy; it's just that I'm growing up, perhaps I'm suffering from growing pains." She stood up and adjusted her narrow skirt. "These skirts are not meant for sitting in," she said. "I must go home. A frightful little man with a sweaty forehead and crowned teeth gives me Spanish lessons twice a week. The flat positively stinks of his hair oil for hours after he leaves, but he's a good teacher. By the way, what do you intend to do this evening? Are you visiting Parker by any chance? "

"Oh, no!" Flora looked disconcerted. "No, I shall be here washing our clothes. I'm planning to empty the entire laundry basket."

"Good. I may come round and do some of my mental sorting here."

"I'd love it if you did."

"Goodbye then. If I don't see you before, have a good Easter."

"And if I don't see you before, enjoy yourself in Seville. Goodbye, goodbye."

Flora slowly closed the door: 'Goodbye, my dear. I'm sure there is something wrong —money perhaps or a quarrel with John. But how dense I am! Of course it's a baby and she hasn't told John yet. It must be a doctor she is visiting this evening and at the moment she's feeling a little bewildered and afraid.'

Leo returned for luncheon, wearing his London face. He

walked straight into the kitchen and said: "Take that soup, or whatever it is, off the electric ring. We are having luncheon out."

"Out to luncheon?" she echoed. "But who has asked us?" She gazed at Leo in astonishment.

"I'm asking you. We will go to that little place in Balma where they have the day's specialities written on the window with whitening, unless you prefer anywhere else."

"They had chicken and gambas written up today. Could we have that?"

"You shall have whatever you want. Eat through the whole menu if you feel like it. We have something to celebrate—but I'll tell you about it later."

They were both wearing their London faces as they sat in the pink and green restaurant devouring the most enormous and beautifully cooked meal, consisting of hors d'oeuvre, canelones, chicken with gambas and early strawberries served with 'nata'. "About the most indigestible meal we could choose, but isn't it heavenly?" Flora sighed blissfully over her liqueur brandy. "I can't wait any longer to know what we are celebrating." Then Leo told her he had at last secured the translating work he had been hoping to obtain. "It's even better than I expected. Three whole days a week and the pay is good by Spanish standards. I shall have to give up quite half my teaching work, either the school or private pupils. I haven't really planned what to do about that, but I won't be starting for about a month, which leaves me plenty of time to work things out. Did I tell you they are insurance people? The building is simply enormous, like a block of flats. The hours will take a bit of getting used to, but I think they will suit us quite well really." He glanced at a piece of paper which he took from his notecase. "Be prepared for a shock, it's eight in the morning until two; then I'm finished for the day. The firm are seeing about a labour permit, so that should be all

right." Leo leant across the table and took his wife's hand. "Things are going to be very different, you'll see."

"I'm sure they are," she said earnestly. "So far we've been like wine that travels badly; but that's all over now."

"Yes. I feel like that too," he laughed. "But I know we are really going to settle down and make a life for ourselves here."

As they left the restaurant, Flora said: "Oh, Leo, I'm feeling so happy and I've made so many good resolutions. I don't think I'll keep them this afternoon though. As soon as I get home I'm going to roll onto the bed and sleep all this food off."

On their way home they passed a radio shop and Leo remarked that their money from England was due in a few days. "You must have a wireless so that it won't be so dull for you while I'm away—although I shall be at home more now and I hope I shan't be so tired and irritable. Poor little Flora! You have had a wretched time." They walked hand in hand in a state of delicate happiness.

Quite late in the evening, when Flora was in the kitchen preparing a salad, she heard a quick ring at the bell. Thinking it was the portero on his evening round, she opened the door with the rubbish bucket in her hand. There stood Meg, her beautiful face streaked with tears, yet her expression was a happy one.

"Meg! I'd given you up. Do you mind coming into the kitchen and we can talk while I work."

Meg stood just inside the hall. "No, no. I won't come in. I was just passing and I thought I'd say I wasn't coming. That sounds a bit dotty." With one hand she attempted to brush her hair away from her flushed face. "I want to get back to John. I've done my sorting out. Really there was nothing to sort out. I must have been mad to have thought there was." She suddenly bent down and kissed Flora. "Goodbye.

I'll see you when we return." She opened the door and let herself out.

Flora slowly walked back to the kitchen and stood with the rubbish bucket still in her hand, thinking: 'She is so excited I could feel her trembling. It must be a baby and she hardly knows whether to be pleased or sorry. I'm so happy for them and for Leo and me as well.'

Screaming fire engines tore down Provenza. Whether they were going or coming, the fire-engine sirens screamed and howled as they rushed through the streets. Red and roaring they tore through the streets as if spreading fire. Flora finished preparing her salad, and on the roof her badly-washed sheets fluttered in the spring wind.

NINE

FLORA LOOKED THROUGH the Judas hole and there was Parker shining through the glass like a little blue jewel. She opened the door with shaking hands and said in a flat voice: "Have you come to say goodbye? I wasn't really expecting you to."

Parker entered, kicking the door to behind him. "Well, that's not much of a welcome. Sulking?" He took her face between his hands and kissed her on the lips. He drew back surprised at her cold response, "My God! You are a little iceberg. Is anything the matter?" He put his arm round her and drew her to him. "You know, I've missed you the last few days. I wish you were coming on this trip. Meg's a charming girl, but a bit unpredictable and I find John heavy on the hands. He's a good boy, salt of the earth and all that kind of thing, but a bloody fool all the same. We'd have been off three days ago if he hadn't held us up over some damn nonsense connected with his work."

Flora disengaged herself and walked towards the window and Parker followed her, caught her by her bare arm and turned her towards him and gently kissed her on the lips, eyes and throat. She relaxed for a moment, then suddenly wrenched herself away and shouted in a voice unlike her own: "It's finished, all finished I tell you." Then almost pleadingly: "Parker, don't be angry with me, but it's finished, I'm sorry but it really is." She stood looking at him as if she expected him to hit her, slow tears rolling down her

cheeks and her hands nervously clenched. Parker was speechless for a moment; then he shrugged his shoulders and said: "If that's the way you want it, there is no more to be said; but don't have hysterics. I've no idea what's biting you—some bloody nonsense, I suppose." He gave her a patronizing pat on the shoulder, then turned away and said: "I'll see myself out." And Flora stood listening to his vanishing footsteps and the final sound of the door closing.

She looked down at her clenched hands and said: "It means something if the thumbs are inside the fingers, but I don't know what." Then she sank down on the sofa and buried her burning face in a cushion; but no more tears came and her throat felt dry and constricted. She felt completely exhausted, as if from climbing an unending flight of stone steps, and as she lay there her mind was almost blank except for misery. After about ten minutes she sat up and looked round the room as if surprised to see it still looking the same; then she went to the kitchen and heated up the remains of the breakfast coffee. As she drank it she thought to herself, 'I'd better get out of here and walk somewhere very fast. I mustn't think. In a day or two this will be behind me. It is just the first part that is so hard.' She finished her coffee, carefully rinsing her cup and saucer and leaving them to dry by the sink, then she examined the vegetables on the rack absent-mindedly opening paper bags, peering inside with unseeing eyes and closing them again. A piece of string hanging from a nail tapped the window gently and insistently and from below came the metallic sound of someone beating eggs and every now and again a piercing shout of "Niña".

She suddenly found herself running from the kitchen into the hall, where she snatched up her handbag. She listened for a moment to hear if the coast was clear outside; then, slamming the flat door, she ran down the staircase in the hope of missing the portero, colliding with a strong-smelling old

man in her haste. A few minutes later she was in the street walking towards the Paseo de Gracia. She tried to force herself to look in shop windows, but always seemed to find her eyes fixed on the pavement, 'SCAB, SCAB, SCAB' was all that she saw in metal letters. 'It must mean something useful,' she thought, 'but it looks horrid to me.' She lifted her eyes from the pavement and looked blankly at the groups of people sitting outside cafés in the spring sun; but all she saw was the shoe-shiners with their mouths filled with gold teeth, glittering and sinister. A neatly dressed young man walked beside her. His footsteps were quiet and his eyes wild. Looking straight ahead he spoke filthy words in a flat voice. Sometimes he glanced down from the sides of his eyes, but Flora ignored him, understanding little of what he was saying, and eventually he melted away among the bird cages in the Ramblas. A short dog lifted its leg on a newspaper kiosk; a beggar woman held out a shabby hand—she smelt of lady-birds, or was it cockroaches? Men were building stands for the Easter procession—Hammer! Hammer! A cat passed with no eyes at all; a man with a row of boils on his neck. 'All I can see is ugliness and filth,' she said to herself dejectedly. 'I mustn't go on like this. Perhaps I'd feel better if I looked at the flowers; surely I won't see them all decaying and covered in crawling insects. I think I'd feel cleaner if I could walk by the sea. I wouldn't mind how windy it was.'

She wandered down the flower market and stood among the carnations and lilies, violets and blazing marigolds, and the film which only saw ugliness left her eyes. She bought a bunch of deep purple lilac with a faint, sweet smell, and, as she turned towards the station, she noticed how fresh and green the trees were with their new leaves rustling against the clear sky.

She took the underground train to Provenza and travelled in a carriage filled with priests with their eyes glued to Bibles.

One lifted his eyes from his holy book long enough to offer her a seat, then stood before her swaying as he read. She sat rather self-consciously, feeling that he would think her ungrateful when she left her seat at the next station. When she arrived at the block of flats she saw a large bunch of carnations on the portero's desk and to her surprise he handed them to her. There was a note attached which she read as she went up in the lift. It was a short note; all it said was: "Don't be a silly little fool." She recognized Parker's square handwriting and felt physically sick. 'I'll have to go through it all again now,' she thought miserably, and then, 'If the portero had handed Leo the carnations, what would he have thought? Suppose he read the note.' She was so laden with flowers that she could hardly open the door of the flat and, when she entered the hall, she threw them on the table and stood scowling at them. 'I never thought I'd hate flowers, but I loathe these carnations and I won't have them in the flat,' she muttered as she wondered how to dispose of them. 'If I put them in the dustbin the portero will see them. It's too difficult to get them down the lavatory, and they won't burn easily in the kitchen stove.' Eventually she decided to hide them in one of the wash-houses on the roof. She did this, burnt Parker's note and tried to forget the flowers had ever arrived; but, while she was having luncheon with Leo, there was a ring at the bell and, when she opened the door, there was a small girl standing there holding a large bunch of crimson carnations. She held the flowers up to Flora with a beaming smile as she said: "Mama said you left these above." She smiled and thanked the child, flung the unwanted flowers under the spare bed and returned to Leo. "It was only a child collecting for a special Mass," she said quietly, as she picked up her fork. "They always come at meal-times."

Leo had four days' Easter holiday, and so on the Saturday they decided to visit Sitges. Although the weather was not

particularly promising, the train was crowded and they had to stand on a small open platform between two coaches, holding on to an iron rail as they rocked and crashed through flat country and sniffed the strong smell of fertilizer. They were amused to see that one man escorted his wife to the lavatory, which was also on this rickety platform, and stood guard outside the door for the entire journey. Leo, holding on to his hat with one hand and the rail with the other, said: "I suppose it's one way of getting a seat, but I prefer to stand." When they reached Sitges, the sky had cleared and they walked on an almost deserted beach, Flora carrying her shoes. Then they drank excellent coffee in a small bar where 'gambas' were being boiled. They explored the town, ate the best 'paella' they had ever eaten, and ended their meal sitting outside the café, dreamily digesting as they drank their coffee in the sun. Most of the customers in the restaurant appeared to be large family parties of Catalans, the wife always supervising the meal as if she was at home; but they noticed a few sunburnt Germans, one of them a woman, who was sitting at a table alone eating her way through a large meal. Flora observed that it was a sad thing that a woman eating alone always looked greedy, even if it was only a sandwich. Two middle-aged women with iron-grey, closely-waved hair seated themselves at the next table and Flora whispered: "I bet those women are English. I can tell by the cut and material of their suits." Leo agreed in a low voice and said: "They will be asking for coffee 'con leche' any moment now."

One of the women was talking in a high, floating voice: "What wonderful teeth they have! I had an aunt who cleaned her teeth with vitriol."

"Why vitriol?" her companion asked as she tried to catch the waiter's eye.

"Oh, it was a helpful hint she read in a paper called Violet. After that she had no teeth."

"How unfortunate! Oh, waiter, 'dos' coffee 'con leche', please."

"Two white coffees, Senora?"

"Yes . . . I mean, 'Si'. I wish these waiters wouldn't speak English. It doesn't give one a chance to practise Spanish."

They left the café and slowly walked through the narrow streets of white-washed houses and tiny gardens so filled with flowers that they were pouring down the walls. "Haven't we had a lovely day?" Flora said as they reached the Plaza de Eduardo and saw the station facing them. Parker's imminent return was quite forgotten. "This is the kind of place I imagined we would live in when we came to Spain. But I expect it is quite different in the summer—tourists and cameras and straw hats everywhere. Weren't those dear little houses facing the little beach by the church? They reminded me of Chelsea."

"Oh! Sometimes I think you must be dreadfully homesick."

Flora took Leo's arm. "Don't worry, darling. I'm getting my second wind now and I think I feel much better. People who climb mountains lose their wind and suffer agonies for a few moments; then their second wind comes and they feel marvellous. Perhaps that is how it will be with me."

"I do hope so, Flora dear. Just look at that queue at the booking office. It's going to be a struggle to get on the train; but it's extraordinary how many people manage to cram into a Spanish train and they are all so good-tempered about it."

They returned standing in the corridor of the train while women with a child under each arm and several loose ones trailing behind pushed up and down the corridors and in and out of the compartments. A man with a cleft palate added to the confusion by raffling packets of sweets, weaving his way between the passengers and shouting above the general

din. All of them, except those whose mouths were full of bread and sausage, were talking; some were sharing wine from their 'porrons' and a few read newspapers held close to their eyes. Middle-aged couples held hands, and young ones gazed into each other's eyes; fat men in creased suits held wet babies and slim young girls giggled together and, without exception, everyone in the coach stared at the foreigners as if they had never seen any before.

When they reached Barcelona a fine drizzle was falling and they took a taxi home. As they passed the portero he handed Flora a coloured postcard of Seville. She turned it over, and to her relief saw it was signed by Meg and John. "They will be back on Friday," she said as she counted on her fingers that it was at least six more days before she could possibly have to face Parker again. She thought hopefully that by then she would have more strength to put a final end to their relationship. 'If only I need never see him again! But it will be too difficult to manage while he is so intimate with the Wyndhams and I'd be so lonely if I didn't see them any more. Anyway, how could I explain my sudden objection to seeing Meg and John? I'll try not to think about all this until Friday. Far better to enjoy Leo's holiday and do all I can for him.'

Then, on Easter Monday, John came to the Elliots' flat. Flora was in the bathroom washing her hair when he arrived and Leo opened the door; as he did so, John stumbled in as if he had been leaning against it. He followed Leo into the sitting-room and was still standing there muttering something incomprehensible when Flora joined them, rubbing her hair with a towel. He turned towards her blindly and jerked out: "I had to come. Something terrible has happened." His face was grey and ridged and his eyes looked as if they had been stamped upon. When he spoke he caught his breath from time to time, like a child that has been crying too long.

Flora drew him to the sofa and, as he sat there among the awful roses, the words came pouring out from between his dry lips; at first they were so incoherent that Flora and Leo could not understand or believe what he was trying to tell them. There were only a devastated face and a jumble of words that did not connect together.

"You have lost Meg? There has been an accident?" Leo asked in bewilderment, but Flora suddenly knew, and it was as if she had known for weeks what John was trying to tell them. "You see, even in the train travelling to Seville, there was a queer sort of atmosphere, Meg all impatient and on edge and Parker making sarcastic remarks. I was glad when the carriage filled up. But, when we arrived at the stuffy little 'fonda' we'd booked at, I thought I'd imagined it, what happened in the train. Meg was sweet, so affectionate and not complaining although it was an awful little place. . . ." John's voice trailed away and he sat silent for a few moments gazing down at the floor, then he went on: "I can't understand how it happened. We were so happy there at first. Meg loved the processions at Seville, she thought it marvellous, and Parker seemed to be enjoying it too. He was staying at a proper hotel and had a large double room and bathroom. We used to go there quite a lot because it was more comfortable than our dark room. It really was a dump, so noisy and there was no proper plumbing. just cold showers dripping rusty water. I wasn't surprised when Meg said she'd go round to Parker's hotel for a bath. We were on our way to collect some films which were being developed and she suddenly spoke about the bath, so I took her to the hotel, which was quite near, and told her I'd be back later. She kissed me in the hall and waved before the lift doors closed. Everything was clear between us, I know it was."

John left the sofa and stood facing the window with his back to Flora and Leo. Leo nervously glanced at Flora, who

was running her fingers through her wet hair; but she looked away and wouldn't meet his eyes. "Yes, John?" she said quietly. "You left Meg and went to fetch your films and then what happened?"

"Of course they weren't ready," he said gruffly, with his back still towards them. "I wasted over half an hour wandering about, even drawing a doorway that pleased me; even then I had a long wait at the photographer's. When I came out, the streets were packed with people and it took me ages to reach the hotel. I didn't look at the photographs because we had an agreement not to look at them until we were together. I haven't looked at them yet, although they must be among my things somewhere. I was in such a hurry that I didn't even wait for the lift when I reached the hotel. I just ran up the stairs and banged at Parker's door, and as there was no answer I turned the handle; but the door was locked. At first I thought they had gone out, got tired of waiting for me; then I had this feeling that the room wasn't empty. I could feel them behind the door."

John still spoke with his back turned to his listeners, who sat quietly with their eyes fixed blankly on his back, dark against the window. "You know, it was terrible waiting there, as if there was something sinister about the silence. When I knocked again, really loudly, someone came out of the next room and gaped at me. Then the door suddenly opened wide and there was Parker. He was only wearing his trousers, nothing else, and behind him I could see Meg's clothes strewn about the floor and there was a sound of running water. Parker was saying something silly like: 'Steady old chap, we must have a talk,' and then Meg appeared from the bathroom with his dressing-gown draped round her, and she ran to me crying and saying she couldn't help it. Seeing her in Parker's dressing-gown was the last straw somehow, worse than the crumpled bed, and I found I was hitting Parker,

holding his face and slapping it, and Meg was screaming at me to go away. There was blood coming from his nose and it seemed to terrify her. Christ, it was a revolting scene! Impossible to think we were involved in it, Meg and I." He turned round and fumbled in his pockets for cigarettes, produced an empty packet and dropped it on the floor. Leo handed him his case and they smoked together in silence until Flora asked where Meg was now.

John answered bitterly: "With Parker, I suppose. She was in such a frenzy, I didn't know she could be like that. It was as if Parker had completely changed her. There she was, screaming at me to get out and stay out, and Parker was sitting on the bed with blood pouring down his face. I couldn't help being pleased about that. Perhaps I should have dragged Meg away or something, but I left them together. She was mopping Parker's face with a wet towel and still shouting at me when I went away, and quite a crowd had gathered on the landing listening to the 'extranjeros' behaving badly. I had to push through them. Then I returned to our beastly little 'fonda' and waited. I waited there for two days, hoping and hoping that Meg would come back. The only time I left it was when I went to Parker's hotel, where they told me the 'ingleses' had left. I wasn't really expecting them to be there, but there was a chance. It was wretched in the 'fonda'. The room was only just above street level and all day and night there was the sound of feet passing under my window. The sound seemed to get in my head and I can still hear it. Then I suddenly realized what a fool I was sitting there. Meg had most likely gone to Calle de Tallers. I dashed back to Barcelona; but she wasn't there, not in the flat, anyway, so I came on here."

They sat in the green room, stunned and dejected; then it passed through Flora's mind that it must be a long time since John had had a meal and she went to the kitchen and made

him an omelette and a strong cup of coffee. The meal revived him to such an extent that he was soon discussing plans for Meg's return, "I'm sure she'll be back in a few days. It can't last. She'll loathe Parker when she sees through him; but, when she comes back, she can't stay in Barcelona. We'll have to go to Madrid or somewhere, and start again. There's the studio to be considered, but I could come to some arrangement with Eduardo about it." His one idea seemed to be Meg's return and he appeared completely willing to forgive her, blaming himself for not warning her about Parker. Just as he was leaving, he said: "You see, we are not like ordinary married people. There is so much love and understanding between us and there is nothing to forgive."

TEN

"LEO WHATEVER'S THE matter with you, sitting on the edge of the bed like that? You look like a humped-up bird of prey."

"Sorry, darling. I got out of bed and suddenly I felt faint. There's a frightful taste in my mouth as well. Perhaps it's something I've eaten." Leo took a handkerchief from under his pillow and held it to his mouth. "Do you think you could get me some hot water with bicarbonate of soda, unless you can think of something better. Christ, I feel disgusting! "

Flora crawled out of bed and pulled up the shutter. She looked at Leo closely in the hard white light. "You look awfully yellow. I think you had better get back into bed and I'll take your temperature before you drink anything." She opened a drawer, turned the contents over, then handed Leo the thermometer.

"Don't you think it had better be washed first?" he said sadly.

"Yes, of course. I'm afraid I'm still feeling a bit sleepy," she said with embarrassment as she searched for her bedroom slippers from under the bed. "These tiles are still frightfully cold in the mornings," she muttered as she made her way to the bathroom. She returned a few minutes later with the thermometer in a glass of water with some pink mouth-wash added. "Look, Leo, how professional I've made it look. Open

your mouth." She pushed the thermometer between his teeth. The kettle's on the electric ring and the water will be warm enough to drink in a minute." She left him with the thermometer sticking out of his mouth while she rushed to the bathroom to take a shower. When she returned a few minutes later, wrapped in a large bath towel, Leo told her his temperature was almost normal. "That proves it must be something I've eaten, just a bilious attack. I'll be better tomorrow; but I'm afraid you'll have to tell the school. Could you manage the telephone, do you think?" Flora did not consider her Spanish up to telephone standard and preferred to visit the school, even if it meant missing her breakfast.

Just as she was leaving the flat there was an electricity cut so she had to use the dark stairs. In the darkness she passed men breathing heavily, sometimes resting doubled over the banisters. School children ran down the steps while their mothers, walking slowly behind, shouted at them to take care. When she eventually reached the hall, there were several stout women shouting in their harsh voices at the portero, who was snarling behind his counter in the darkness. Buckets containing ice had been abandoned at the foot of the staircase and an old man in a beret sat on the bottom step singing to himself.

As Flora opened the glass doors into the street she saw John walking towards her. He looked considerably better, shaved and with his chestnut hair combed and shining in the morning light. "Flora! How early you are!" He exclaimed as he took her hand. "I want to thank you both for being so kind and understanding yesterday. It would have been terrible to have returned and had no one to talk to. I haven't told Eduardo yet and I'm against telling him if it can possibly be avoided. It will make it difficult for Meg when she returns. She will return, you know." He smiled for a moment. Then his face darkened. "It drives me crazy to think of her with

Parker. It's like some dreadful nightmare that goes on and on. Parker of all people!"

Flora said. "I agree about telling Eduardo. Just say Meg's staying on for a few days or something like that. Wait until she returns. Listen, John, I'm worried about Leo. He's got food poisoning, at least he feels dreadfully sick and looks so strange—sort of grey-yellow. Could you 'phone the school for me? They will have to arrange for someone else to take his classes and it's going to put them out a lot. I was going down there; but it would be much better if you 'phoned."

They walked together to the café to use the telephone and have a quick breakfast. Flora drank her coffee while John telephoned. As she waited she wrote a brief shopping list on the marble-topped table, feeling faintly amused to think what the next customer would think of the English words. When John returned he told her that the secretary of the school had been a bit short with him. "In fact, she almost bit me," he said ruefully as he lifted the saucer she had placed over the coffee.

"Oh, well, Leo may be giving up the school in a week or two," she said cheerfully as she bit into her roll. "Of course you haven't heard that he has got some regular translating work. The school have been very decent to him in many ways; but the pay is so poor and the hours so long. He hasn't decided whether to give up his private pupils or the school, but in any case he will only teach three evenings a week. It's going to make such a difference to our lives—having more time together—and I'm sure we will be much happier" She glanced across the table at John, holding his coffee-cup with both hands while he stared with unseeing, empty eyes. "Sorry, John, talking about things improving for us when everything has gone wrong for you."

John smiled. "No, I'm very pleased about it. You both deserve a break. You know, I've often felt worried; in fact

. . . well, sometimes I thought Parker had his eyes on you. You seemed so lonely and lost. . . ." Flora stood up and said breathlessly: "Thank you for the breakfast, but I'd better hurry back. I mustn't leave Leo too long. He may be feeling worse and been sick or something."

John signalled the waiter as they said goodbye. "I'll look in this evening," he said, avoiding her eyes. "I'll look in this evening and see how he is. I could find you a doctor if necessary."

Flora went as far as the door, stood still for a moment, then turned and walked back to John and said in a tearful voice: "You are perfectly right about Parker and me and it was much worse than just having his eye on me. John, I'm so ashamed and blame myself about Meg. If only I'd warned her! but I didn't realize . . ." John gently took her arm and hurried her from the café. When they reached the street, he said: "Poor Flora, don't blame yourself!" He looked down at her tear-stained quivering face. "I wish I hadn't said that about Parker, but I couldn't help wondering sometimes. Does Leo know?"

"Perhaps. I don't know. We never discussed it, but I think he knows there was something between us. I told Parker it was all finished just before you went to Seville."

They reached the block of flats where Flora lived and she stood outside dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief. "Does it show much, John?" she asked. "I don't want to face the portero like this."

"No, hardly at all, but we could cross the street and buy some fruit or something for Leo to give you time to recover. It doesn't matter about the portero, but Leo will worry if he sees you so upset."

A few minutes later Flora let herself into the flat and hurried to the bedroom, still holding her shopping basket in her hand. Against the grey sheets Leo appeared very yellow.

Yellow illnesses ran through her mind—yellow fever, yellow Jack (she was not sure if that was an illness or a flag), then there was yellow jaundice. He was lying with his eyes closed, but when they were open they were yellow too.

“Did you manage to 'phone the school?” he asked.

“That's all right. John telephoned for me. How do you feel?”

“Sort of sea-sick and I can't see properly. I'd love a fruit drink if you have any oranges or lemons.” He closed his eyes. “I'm not closing my eyes because I feel dreadfully ill, but it's more comfortable that way.”

Flora went to the kitchen and squeezed lemons and oranges, carefully straining the juice from the segments as she pondered over her confession to John. ‘I expect Parker has told Meg about me already and I can imagine what his version of what happened between us would be like. Particularly after the last time he came to the flat. He must have come to see me that morning because he thought he had no chance with Meg after all and did not want to lose me until he had found someone to take my place. How could I have been so taken in by him? I never loved him in my mind, not even in the beginning. It was mostly physical attraction, I suppose; but I had to go through with it, nothing could have stopped me. I felt sort of greedy and ruthless, with no sense of guilt or remorse. That came later. Poor, poor Meg!’

She took Leo his fruit drink; but he had fallen asleep, so she left it by the bed, standing for a few moments looking down at him. She decided that, even if he had no temperature, it would be better to call in a doctor; he looked extremely ill. She began to imagine that he was dying and saw herself as a lonely, remorseful widow with the bitter memory of the unhappiness of their last few months always with her, a little black widow with a bent back hovering around a foreign graveyard. As she was groping in her sleeve for her hand-

kerchief Leo opened his eyes and smiled. "Oh, Leo!" she cried. "You won't die, will you, and leave me alone with a Spanish funeral to manage?" Then they were both laughing. "They have such black ones," she laughed, "and only men are allowed."

"Don't worry, darling," Leo said as he sat up in bed to drink his fruit juice. "I expect I've only got cirrhosis of the liver from drinking too much. At the moment I feel I never want to see a drink again."

When Flora passed through the hall later in the day, the portero shouted: "Donde está Mister?" Startled, she walked back to his counter as she tried to work out how to say that Leo was bilious in Spanish. With surprising ease she made it clear that 'Mister' was suffering from his liver. The portero jumped to his feet, lifted the flap of the counter, and stood beside her, patting her on the shoulder familiarly. "Un momento," he said, and rushed from the building, to return a minute or two later carrying a bottle of 'gaseosa' and beaming all over his sallow face. He told her with great emphasis that 'Mister' was to drink the 'gaseosa' with a raw egg added and he would immediately feel better, although it might take several eggs and bottles of 'gaseosa' before he made a complete recovery. He refused to be paid, saying it was 'nada', but insisted on Flora returning immediately to the flat to start 'Mister's' treatment.

She went into the bedroom brandishing the 'gaseosa'. Leo opened a livery eye and said: "What on earth are you doing with that dreadful stuff? You don't drink it, do you?"

"Of course not," Flora replied cheerfully, "It's for you. You're to drink it with raw egg and you will feel the results immediately. It's a little present from the portero."

"He's quite right. I certainly would feel the results immediately. Take the bottle away, it makes me feel sick even to look at it." There was a ring at the bell and they exchanged

glances. "Good God!" Leo exclaimed, sitting up in bed, "it's my French pupil. I'd forgotten him."

Flora peered through the Judas hole and saw the Frenchman standing expectantly with a little paper-backed book in his hand. She opened the door and managed to convey the fact that her husband was ill by speaking in a mixture of Spanish, French and English, but mostly English. The pupil stood biting his neat moustache for a moment, then suggested that Flora gave him a lesson and she reluctantly agreed to do so. She considered him the least alarming of Leo's pupils and she did not like to risk offending him by sending him away snubbed and untaught. When they were in the living-room she placed two of the miserable bentwood chairs by the table and sat down; but her pupil smiled and shook his head and seated himself in one of the arm-chairs, motioning her to another. He opened his paper-backed book, which proved to be an abbreviated edition of *Pride and Prejudice*, marked about halfway through with a piece of paper. For a moment he wriggled about in his chair, trying to avoid the faulty springs; then he started to read fairly fluently, stopping every now and then to ask the meaning of some word, often a very ordinary one such as "noisy, advice, folly," but happily skimming over the more difficult "comprised, acquaintance, felicity", so she presumed he knew their meaning. Through the folding doors she could hear the usual sound of seagulls crying as Leo moved in bed. She smiled to herself as she imagined his surprise at her conducting a lesson and it seemed to her that the sound of seagulls grew stronger when he disagreed with her rather hazy definitions of common words.

Abruptly the reading ceased and Flora's pupil demanded dictation. He produced a pencil and notebook from somewhere on his person and sat waiting expectantly. Feeling embarrassed, she started reading Chapter XXXVII: "The two gentlemen left Rosings the next morning . . .",

stumbling badly when she reached the word "obeisance". The Frenchman asked her to repeat it, but to her relief Leo's voice came floating through the door pronouncing the word correctly and also giving its definition. The lesson passed more easily than she had expected, and, when her pupil had gone, she felt a sense of achievement.

Towards the evening John called and, with some difficulty, persuaded Leo to see a doctor. The next obstacle was to find one who was a general practitioner or liver-specialist; but as most Spaniards seemed to suffer from liver trouble John hoped it would not be too difficult. Leo suggested asking a chemist's advice, and John went off in the hope that there would be a doctor coming round that evening. He was startled at Leo's gamboge tint, although he could not help thinking how fascinating it would be to paint.

The doctor did not materialize until the following morning. He had the dismal face of a bloodhound, red-eyed and with flapping lips. After examining Leo he gave a verdict of "una infeccion de higado" and after some questioning about the particular kind of infection of the liver disclosed it was jaundice. Leo's diet was to consist of fruit and glucose and rice boiled with vegetables with an occasional rusk if he felt like it, certainly no egg. It was arranged that a 'practicante' would give a series of injections, and Flora was handed two prescriptions to have made up. Unfortunately one was an imported German drug and proved very expensive.

The news of 'Mister's' liver trouble spread round the building and the 'señoras' Flora met in the hall and lift all asked after him and suggested remedies. Honey mixed with olive oil was a favourite, and the water that rice had been boiled in was another. The portero kept examining her basket and asking why it did not contain bottles of 'gaseosa', so that she was forced to buy a few to satisfy him, giving them later to the little boys who played football on the roof. Once she

found a woman at her door holding a bowl of bright yellow soup with a film of shimmering grease on top. She thanked her profusely, feeling guilty when she poured it down the sink. She was touched by this kindly interest, but felt it better to follow the doctor's advice. In spite of his unprepossessing appearance he seemed to be reliable and Leo was making a quick recovery under his treatment. All the same, the doctor took a poor view of his general health, insisting that he should visit specialists, have his chest x-rayed and remove himself to pine-covered mountains—Switzerland for preference. Although Leo was disconcerted by the suggestion that his lungs might be giving trouble again, he laughed and said he had his living to earn and couldn't afford expensive treatments; but the doctor was so insistent that he became uneasy and began to wonder if it would not be wise to move to the hills above the city now that he would not be working such long hours. It might be quite pleasant living in the country if the journey into Barcelona were not too difficult, and certainly Flora would find more to interest her there. Watching her one morning as she stood before the open window attending to her five sad and sooty geraniums with such loving care, he definitely decided on the move. He also decided not to mention the fact to his wife until he had made some inquiries about suitable places to live in and the kind of rent he would be expected to pay. He thought he would advertise in the *Vanguardia*.

ELEVEN

AS SOON AS he recovered, Leo resigned from the school and, as they had been put to considerable inconvenience by his absence, the parting was a little cold. "The Director was so formal with me when I left. I don't like parting like that. I think I'll call round in a few days and give him my text books. I certainly never want to see them again and I could ask him to luncheon at the same time."

"Perhaps you will be able to send him a few pupils. He'd like that even better. I suppose you'll keep the best ones and teach them in their own homes—the dear old Frenchman, for instance," Flora said as she placed rice and vegetables on the table. "It will be nice when we can have real food again. It's not worth cooking it just for one."

"Why don't you have John here for a meal?" Leo suggested. "He's so tall that he manages to eat enough for two normal people, so your cooking won't be wasted. Thank you," he took the plate she handed, admiring the different colours of the vegetables, "I like these vegetable dishes, although I suppose they'd taste better if I was allowed butter or cheese. There's no reason why you shouldn't have some, though"

"No, I suppose not," she answered absent-mindedly as she played with the food on her plate. "It must be about four or five days since we saw John. Do you think he's all right? I don't like to go round to his studio and ask because Eduardo doesn't know about Meg yet, at least I don't think so." She

106

looked at Leo apprehensively. "Suppose Parker has returned and John has murdered him?"

Leo laughed. "Unfortunately I think that quite unlikely, but if it will set your mind at rest I'll call round this evening. I shall be teaching very near Tallers."

When they had finished their meal, a pupil arrived bringing with him the usual strong smell of brilliantine, and Flora retired to the bedroom to mend shirts. Leo's shoulders had grown so thin that they wore holes in his shirts and she had to cut pieces from the tail to patch the shoulders with. Tiring of her sewing, she opened the window and leant out to feel the sun on her face and to idly watch some workmen who were building a block of flats. The building had started a few days after they had moved into their flat, and she felt a proprietary interest in it. It was to consist of fourteen flats for workers, and to herself she said that when they put the roof on she would be free to move, but until then she would remain imprisoned. Several times she had been mistaken into thinking that at last they were working on the top floor, but they always started another. The first sign that a new floor was being built had been the window- and door-frames, which had been propped up in some way, the walls being built round them. The workmen had collected several puppies, which were always falling down holes and through windows, yelping piteously as they did so, limping badly for a few days and then recovering completely. Before the men left their work at night they changed their clothes, washed and combed their hair and went into the street looking like bank clerks. Flora preferred them in their working clothes because they reminded her of the young men she used to see in the King's Road. She thought they would have a great success in any of the Chelsea coffee bars. Signs of warmer weather were appearing on the near-by roofs, she noticed. Carpets that had been used during the winter were being washed and beaten

and wrapped up into long newspaper parcels; garden furniture and flower-pots were being painted brilliant shades of blue, green and yellow; and outside most of the windows the birds in their little cages sang. Workmen came to change the earth in flower-boxes, urns and pots, and on Sundays families sat drinking aperitifs and Coca-Cola on their balconies. But even on Sundays the everlasting laundry flapped from almost every roof and balcony.

Seeing nothing to catch her attention, Flora returned to the bed and sat there with her mending, trying to close her ears to the lesson in progress behind the closed doors. She was feeling depressed and uneasy because that morning she had seen a plaster cast of Parker's head of her exhibited in an optician's window—the face faintly smiling behind violet-coloured sun-glasses. Parker had told her he was keeping her sculpted head to exhibit in an exhibition he was giving later in the year, and now here it was to mock and disturb her. She tried to think of it as part of her deserved punishment. 'But why should I be the one to be punished, why not Parker for a change?' she thought angrily as she snapped her thread of cotton. 'I only hope Leo doesn't see it, he'd be furious. I was a fool and deserve to see my awful face leering at me from shop windows; but, if only it had been advertising scent or flowers or something nice—but sun-glasses and spectacles!'

Later in the afternoon she went to the British Institute to change her books, avoiding the streets that had opticians in them. She sat in the beautiful reading-room, reading *The Sunday Times* and sitting on the latest *Vogue*. The sun shimmered through the windows and it was wonderfully peaceful, just the sound of pages turning and sometimes of muted footsteps. There appeared to be no English people present, only Catalans with smooth round faces and glossy heads. She wandered sleepily into the library and chose three novels, one a tried favourite, one that had been well reviewed and a shot

in the dark. This was her usual system of choosing books and it worked as well as any other.

With her books under her arm, Flora left the library and started to walk home through the Diagonal. As she neared the Bar Cristobal, she noticed that quite a number of people were still sitting outside in the evening sun. Then, to her horror, she saw Parker amongst them, sitting at a table with a wild-looking boy clutching a battered suitcase. Somehow it had never entered her head that Parker would return to Barcelona with Meg; she had imagined them staying in Seville until they tired of each other. In fact she had consigned them to a sort of limbo. Now Parker had returned it was highly probable that he would call on her or even tell Leo about their past relationship. Parker had become a sort of monster in her eyes, capable of anything. All sorts of frightful possibilities rushed through her mind as she darted across the road among the traffic, ignoring the traffic lights for 'peatones'. If the policeman blew his whistle after her, she never knew, because she ran down the Calle de Enrique Granados clutching her books to her chest as if for protection.

When Leo returned home later in the evening, he was accompanied by John. John's face wore a sort of blurred look and his eyes were bloodshot and dim. He said he thought he had got a touch of flu; but over their drinks he admitted that he had spent the previous night standing outside Parker's studio. Apparently he had taken to walking that way every evening to see if there was a light in the windows, but until that night they had always been dark. He had not actually seen Meg, but he had seen Parker moving past an unshuttered window several times and heard his voice. At about twelve o'clock the lights had been turned off; but he couldn't leave the studio windows for long. He would walk away for a few minutes and then something would draw him back and he would stand in the darkness torturing himself. He longed to

do something violent, throw a rock through the window, beat and bang at the door, call to Meg; but he knew it would do no good, only harm Meg and turn her against him. Every now and again the 'vigilante' had passed, clumping his staff on the pavement, and he had had to hide in the shadows. He ended his dreary narrative by saying: "The thought of Meg being shut up there with Parker made me feel physically sick."

Leo put down his glass and looked at John intently for a moment and said: "How do you know Meg is still with Parker?"

John and Flora looked at him in astonishment. Then John stammered: "Well, she must be with Parker, I mean, where else could she be?" Suddenly brightening: "Do you really think she has left him already?"

Leo lit a cigarette, carefully blew out the match, then said quietly: "I may be wrong, but I think it quite likely. I'll go to the studio tomorrow, if you like, and inquire."

Flora cried: "No, no, Leo, don't go to Parker's studio. I don't want you to go there. He'll tell you lies." She stood up, looked round wildly, then sat down again, and said more calmly: "It's just that you hate Parker and so do I now and wish we'd never met him. Please don't go and see him."

"No. She's quite right. I'm the one who must see Parker." John stood up and put his hand on Leo's shoulder for a moment. "Thank you for offering to go, though. I feel much more hopeful now," and smilingly added: "and it isn't only the drink."

Flora persuaded him to eat a sandwich in the kitchen and stood beside him while he ate it, begging him not to do anything violent; then added in a low voice: "I saw him this evening and he wasn't with Meg. Just with a broken-down young man, but I didn't mention it to Leo. You will let us know how you get on, won't you?"

John did not return that evening; but the following morn-

ing he called on his way to work. Leo had departed on some mysterious errand and Flora was still in her dressing-gown when she answered the door. She took him into the sitting-room and closed the windows, apologizing for the smoky atmosphere as she did so. "It's Belcher. He's like a volcano today and the wind is blowing this way," she chatted as she gave him a furtive glance to gather some idea of his state of mind. She decided he looked rested but still anxious. "Did you see him?" she asked as they sat down opposite each other.

"Yes, I saw him. He looked kind of scared when he opened the door and saw me standing there; then he blustered: 'Well, what do you want?' So I just said 'Meg' and he laughed and said he couldn't help me and I should keep a better eye on my wife. He shut the door then, so I started kicking it and my foot went through eventually. I had quite a job getting it back. Parker opened the door and then shouted, 'For Christ's sake, stop being such a bore! I know nothing about Meg, haven't seen her for days. It's all washed up between us and it's no good pestering me about her. Just look at that bloody door! I only repainted it a few weeks ago!' He really seemed concerned about it and called to someone who appeared to be frying in the kitchen, from the sizzling I could hear. The derelict young man you saw came along then, holding a greasy fork in his hand." John paused and gave a bewildered laugh. "You know, Parker really is extraordinary. He stood there in great surprise and indignation saying, 'Look what this fool has done to my door! You will have to have a go at mending it tomorrow. I haven't the time. Up to my eyes in work after this damn silly honeymoon in Seville. If you really want to see Meg again I should advise you to go there, John. When I last saw her she had gone back to that rotten little 'fonda' you stayed in. I offered her a mil note, but she refused—got plenty of pesetas with her perhaps. I don't know. These hysterical young women, you're welcome

to them! Come on, Robert, get on with those frankfurters! I want my dinner.' He followed Robert into the kitchen, still leaving the battered door open; shouted 'Good night' in quite a friendly voice, and disappeared. There didn't seem any point in staying after that. I'd gathered all I wanted to know."

John sat silent for a moment frowning at a painting of a dead hare. "Well, the next thing is to find her," he said slowly as he tugged at one of his ears, and said as if to himself: "It's a funny thing. I never really noticed Parker's eyes before. They are such a bright blue, but completely shallow like dolls' eyes. They could be made of glass."

"Yes, perhaps they are a bit glassy," Flora said thoughtfully. I always imagined him as a toy sailor. He has such a jaunty, rolling sort of walk—I used to think it attractive once, and all that blue, the fisherman's jersey and jeans and his long thin legs and short body, exactly like a toy sailor. He only needed a little round hat." She spoke in a dreamy voice. John lit a cigarette and neither of them spoke for several minutes. Then Flora said: "What will you do now? Go to Seville, I suppose?"

"I think it unlikely that Meg is still in Seville. I telephoned the hotel last night. She'd left two days ago. She only had about five hundred pesetas on her when we parted and there can't be much of that left by now. She may hitch-hike to Barcelona; but I don't think she'd come to me, not straight away anyway. She doesn't know how much I want her to—terribly, all the time. This Parker business has done nothing to what I feel about her. Do you know, I think she will come to you . . . and, if she does, you must tell her how I feel, tell her how much I still love her. Bring her to me yourself, wherever I am, but don't let her out of your sight." He stubbed his cigarette, then stood up. "I must go, I'm supposed to be working on Gracia station, painting a poster directly on the wall—they find it cheaper to have them done by hand. I have

to paint two little horrors playing leap-frog round a cup containing some revolting drink. So I'll be at the station if I'm wanted."

After John left, Flora slowly dressed while she turned over in her mind the possibility of Meg arriving at the flat in a distressed condition. She felt afraid of the responsibility. It seemed to her it would be like trying to catch a bird that had escaped from its cage; one mustn't startle it; yet, if one is too cautious, it may fly away again. If she arrived at the flat while Flora was out shopping, would she wait or go away for ever? The more she thought about it, the more worried she became. For the rest of the day she listened to the lift's perpetual groaning and clanking, the rattle of the doors and the crash of them opening and closing. Several times she thought she heard footsteps outside her door; but when she opened it the footsteps were outside other doors. She left her shopping until Leo was at home, explaining to him why she did so. "Don't stay out long," he pleaded. "I'd be fearfully embarrassed if she arrived and you weren't here to deal with it. I could give her a drink and make light conversation, I suppose; but it would be difficult. I couldn't even say 'How did you like Seville?' for instance."

They lived in a state of perpetual suspense for the next two days. Nothing happened. The sun shone, but Flora had to be content to see it glittering on the roofs, only leaving the flat to do her shopping. Sometimes high-heeled footsteps stopped outside her door, but they belonged to women bringing samples of Palmolive soap or selling raffle tickets in aid of a school for poor girls. On the third morning Flora felt it was no good waiting in the flat any longer; if Meg was coming she would have arrived by now; in any case the strain was getting unbearable. Leo agreed and told her to keep herself free for the following morning because he was thinking of taking her into the country. "You have been home too much

and the weather is so lovely; it's a pity for you to miss this spring sun. I haven't a pupil until five o'clock, so there will be plenty of time. We could take a picnic luncheon if you like although I really prefer eating in a restaurant." He laughed. "I'm afraid I'm the kind of man who isn't happy eating unless he has his legs under a table." When Flora asked where they were going, Leo said it was to be a surprise—somewhere she had never seen before, but he thought she would like it; anyway she would find it interesting.

During the morning John arrived looking rather wild. He refused to come into the hall, just stood there breathless. There had been an electricity cut and he had had to walk up the stairs. "I've only come to tell you I'm off to England this afternoon," he gasped. "I've been round to the Consul this morning. Can't think why I didn't go there before; I might have caught her—Meg. She asked them for her fare home, said there was family trouble at home in England and she would refund the money as soon as she got there. They bought her a ticket, gave her some travelling money and even saw her off at the station. She gave her father's address in Guildford so I think she intends to go to him. He's the most understanding man and won't ask too many questions. At least I hope not; I don't want her to have to do a lot of explaining." He took Flora's hand, shook it formally and said: "Next time you see me I shall be with Meg. Goodbye, and thank you for everything." Then he turned and rushed down the stairs.

When Flora told Leo that John had gone to England to find Meg she asked: "Would you take all that trouble over me if I had run away with Parker—I mean someone?" He looked at her gravely for a minute and said: "You know I would," then picked up his book and went on reading. She leaned over the back of his chair and rested her face against his and said: "I can hardly wait for this mysterious and interesting

picnic tomorrow. What time do we start?" He smiled and laid down his book. "I think there is a bus about ten-thirty; we could take that if it isn't too early for you." She assured him that she would be ready by then and added: "I think we will take a picnic. I can't manage a table for you, but I could manage some plates."

At ten-twenty the next morning they were standing in a bus queue in the Plaza de España. When Flora saw how large the queue was, her heart sank. So many women and children, so many push-chairs. Workmen with tools, grandfathers with bundles, women carrying calm white hens under their arms, and everyone with baskets of food. They could not all fit into one bus and, if there was a scramble, Leo would never push. He always stood back and said 'after you'. But somehow they they did fit in. Not even a chicken was left behind. They stood packed so tightly that they supported one another, and the conductor, completely unperturbed, pushed his way between the passengers as he gave out his tickets. Flora waited expectantly to hear where Leo was booking to, and when she heard 'Tres Torres' she cried disappointedly: "But Leo, that's that boring little station where the trains never stop on the Cataluña line. It's right in Barcelona." Leo laughed. "Perhaps you never noticed a place called 'Tres Torres' we passed on our way to Sitges?" Flora considered for a moment with her tongue between her teeth. "Do you mean that place with the towers on the hills and that we are going to the sea?" she asked hopefully. "If this bus is going the right way, we are," Leo replied as the bus suddenly came to a stop and a departing passenger knocked his hat over his eyes.

Soon they had seats and felt very content as they jolted away from Barcelona through small industrial towns, flat fields and rustling bamboos. Their nearest fellow passenger was a cheerful old man with a round face like a pomegranate and a tiny black beret perched on top of his almost shaven

grey head. He soon got into conversation with the foreigners, and with pride pointed out the aeroplanes which were flying low overhead. He told them that they came from all over the world, many foreign planes, and, if they were fortunate, they might even see one on the ground, as the bus passed very near the airport. He became most excited when the airport came in view, pointing at the silver aeroplanes shimmering in the sun. "Look at that," he cried. "Seven or eight on the ground at least. That's a sight for foreigners to see. You wouldn't see anything like that in your own country, would you? Aeroplanes from all over the world come here." The other passengers appeared to be completely unmoved, but Flora and Leo expressed astonishment. From a side turning they saw something that appeared to be an advancing fire with curling red smoke and they gazed fascinated as it drew nearer, only to see it materialize as a flock of sheep red with dust and walking in their own red cloud. Gradually the bus became almost empty and their aero-minded friend got off with many 'adios's', waving at them from time to time before he disappeared down a path between a miniature forest of bamboos.

Then they were travelling on a main road and the bus had ceased its jolting. Pepper trees with their weeping leaves lined the road, the bark peeling off the trunks in pink and silver strands. In the distance they saw a toy-like castle perched on a hill, and on their left the blue line of the sea and a rash of bungalows and villas dotted among pine-trees. Hoardings advertising hotels, camping sites and bars began to give the road a shanty-town appearance; even the pepper trees had advertisements for Calisay wrapped round them. "I'm afraid we get out here," Leo said apologetically as he took Flora's arm to steer her down the steps. "It's much better when you get off this main road." She looked at him in surprise. "But how do you know? You haven't been here before, have you?"

"I was here the other day. As a matter of fact I came to see a house which I thought might do for us. It isn't ideal by any means, but you'd enjoy the sea and sun and it isn't too far from Barcelona." He paused and looked about him. "Yes, I think this is the turning, I remember that hoarding." He took Flora's hand: "Come on, darling, we have to walk up this road to get the key from the builder's office."

But Flora stood on the corner of the sandy lane staring at Leo; then asked confusedly if there really was a chance of their moving from the flat. He assured her there was, and as they walked up the hill he told her that he had been planning the move for some time but had not wanted to raise her hopes before they had anywhere to move to. As it was, he had had considerable difficulty in finding a house to rent, although there were plenty for sale. He had inspected two in La Floresta; but one had proved too expensive and the other was damp and dark, with fir trees pushing against its tiny windows. He told her it had been the doctor's idea that he should try Tres Torres. Although it was not a mountain retreat as he had at first suggested, at least the sea air was invigorating and pine trees abounded. The doctor had great faith in the benefits of living among pine trees and quoted numerous cases of patients of his who had been at death's door completely recovering soon after they had taken to living amongst pines.

Leo continued talking as they climbed the hill, but Flora was almost speechless. When they reached the builder's house they had to wait outside for some minutes before the right key was found. Then, to their disappointment, the builder's wife accompanied them to the house. They passed prosperous-looking villas with terraced gardens filled with early summer flowers. Some were still being built and there was the usual builder's mess in the road—baths, bricks, sand and tiles and the extraordinary rubble that Spanish workmen tip down handy inclines or leave piled up in

the road. The house, when they came to it, was completely different from its neighbours; for one thing, it was built in an exhausted gravel pit, which, their guide pointed out, sheltered them from the wind in winter. The house was one of two joined together, rather resembling a fort, and was built of large stones cemented together. Compared with its neighbours it appeared very stark, but Flora and Leo preferred it to the embarrassing, flamboyant style of the other villas, which rather resembled Japanese dog-kennels. In front of the house there was an enormous terrace with garages built underneath; the garages were to be let separately. They followed the builder's wife up a steep flight of steps and came to the sun-drenched terrace, which had a good view of the sea. Flora could hardly bear to leave it to enter the shuttered house. The house felt damp and chilly and the woman who was showing them its charms did not consider it necessary to open the shutters, so they received an obscure idea of the rooms they were shown. As the house was new the electricity was not connected. They did see that the sitting-room was large and well-proportioned, with an arched recess at one end, and that there was a large open fireplace, which pleased them. The bathroom was well-fitted and the kitchen, which had a small back-yard leading from it, was quite convenient, with a good double sink and a coal-burning stove to cook by. As it was new, Flora presumed that it would not smoke so badly as the one in their present flat. There were two bedrooms, a box-room and an attractive little extra sitting-room with vivid blue walls. The furniture was made of lightly varnished pine and appeared to be new; there were frilly spotted curtains at all the windows and frilly spotted bed covers that gave the impression that they had been made by loving hands. "I think we'll develop an allergy to spots if we stay here long enough," Flora remarked as they entered the fifth spotted room. But the thing that really horrified them was the plastic and

twisted iron atrocities that hung from walls and ceilings.

In the sitting-room they asked the builder's wife if she would mind lifting the shutter a little so that they could see the room clearly. Surprised, she lifted it three inches, which enabled them to see the flights of plastic swallows skimming round the walls; the plastic flowers in nine different variations of colour which served as a kind of chandelier; the small red and yellow table with a tall plastic flower growing from the centre; the twisted iron lamb with a place for keeping newspapers in its back; artificial flowers in brightly painted pots hanging from the walls of every room; and plastic mats resembling lace standing under every object. Large glass swans with red bows tied on their necks swam across the mantelpiece and a number of plates with Catalan mottoes painted on them crowded up the chimneypiece. "¿Muy bonita, si?" the woman said brightly as she saw them looking round in astonishment. "Si, si," they said with stiff smiles upon their faces. "Don't you think the walls seem a little damp?" Leo asked; but the woman assured him the discoloured walls were caused by the newness of the building. Then Flora said she would like to take another look at the kitchen and asked how the hot-water system worked and was told that the stove heated the water; but they could see no sign of a hot-water tank and they exchanged sceptical glances. Observing their doubtful faces, the woman drew Flora to the sink and showed her the shining new tap with C on it and marched her to the bathroom and showed her two more shining taps with C engraved on them. "There's your hot water," she said crossly, and Leo said he expected it was a different kind of system from the ones they had been used to.

They longed to be alone to examine the house properly; but the woman appeared to be in a hurry and they found themselves on the terrace while they were still uncertain whether to take it or not. "The terrace is perfect anyway,"

Flora said as she stood in the burning sun. "There's room for hundreds of flower-pots and just look at that view! Imagine sitting out here for meals!" Directly behind the house there was a steep, pine-covered hill with an occasional white villa showing between the green. Although the gravel pit was situated in a built-over area, it appeared to be quiet and peaceful. Leo asked about the neighbourhood and was assured that it was 'muy tranquilo'. "It will be wonderful to get away from all those shouting women and radios," they said as they followed the builder's wife's broad back down the steps.

When they parted from her they walked down the hill towards the sea. Leo had told her they would most likely take the house and would telephone the owner that evening. "That gives us a little time to think it over. We had better find somewhere where we can sit down quietly and discuss it. There's quite a nice hotel a few minutes away, although unfortunately they all seem to be built on the main road, where the traffic roars past." Soon they were sitting under a large red and white umbrella drinking sherry and making notes on bits of paper. Leo's notes mostly consisted of figures. "The rent of the house was eighteen thousand pesetas for the year, considerably less than they were paying, but there were the fares to Barcelona to set against it. Then there was the electricity; that was usually more expensive in the country because there was no power. Leo went over his figures carefully, sipped his sherry, ate an olive and decided they could afford the house; but did Flora think it would suit them? Would she be happy there? Flora had been making her own notes which turned out to be a list of useful objects she had noticed the house lacked. "Only one wardrobe for all our clothes, did you notice that? And no chest of drawers. Eight chairs in the living-room, but nothing really to sit on. I don't like the colour of most of the walls, but we could alter that later, I suppose.

I'll need masses of flower-pots for the terrace and a garden table and deckchairs and things. But the main thing is to get rid of all those horrors. Do you think the landlady would mind? "

Leo laughed. "I think you have decided to take the house. Are you sure you would like living out here, though? You will be alone for about four days a week, perhaps more, if the teaching goes well, and think of the winter, with the wind blowing in from the sea and the rain rattling on the roof. Then, at the height of summer there will be all the day-trippers from Barcelona and the campers, besides the people in the hotels and villas. It does not appear to be at all an exclusive sort of place, too near Barcelona."

"But I'd have the sea and that large terrace, and these holiday people couldn't completely fill the whole beach. Just to be able to swim at all would be like heaven and in the winter I could light that great fire and roast chestnuts if I felt like it. All that's the matter with the house is a bit of damp and it needs some sun and air let into it. The furniture is really quite harmless and it seems very clean, and the beds are comfortable—I tried one when that woman's back was turned. No more seagulls."

They finished their drinks and asked the waiter the best way to get to the beach and he showed them a path through the hotel yard, then over the railway lines that ran directly behind the hotel. The beach was straight and long, it appeared to stretch for miles, completely bare except for two family groups and a small, unopened soft-drink stall. "I should think there would be room for everyone here, even if the entire population of Barcelona all came at the same time," Flora observed as they stood with the sea wind blowing in their faces. Leo said wistfully: "I wish we hadn't brought a picnic and were having a nice lunch in that hotel. The wind is a bit strong. I know those picnic lunches where the sandwiches

are gritty. Look, here's an awfully nice dog. I'm sure he's hungry." A yellow-and-white dog came wriggling up to them, looking at their basket hopefully.

"Oh, Leo, I took so much trouble preparing the sandwiches, brown bread because you like it best and they have got ham in them. There's all this fruit, too."

"We can take the fruit home again if necessary; but I do think that poor dog could do with the sandwiches. It has a sort of ham-hunger in its eyes."

Flora held the basket tightly and turned her back on the dog. "Really, Leo, you are the most unpastoral man I ever met!" Then, crossly: "All right, you beastly dog, eat all our picnic!" and she handed it the two packets of sandwiches, then snatched a sandwich back for herself and ate it. "There wasn't a grain of sand on it. You really are fussy."

Leo took her arm and told her not to be so bad-tempered. "You should be glad to have a husband who takes you out to luncheon. Let's walk and get an enormous appetite." So they walked over the fine sand, and the yellow-and-white dog followed them, every now and then bringing them pieces of wood to throw. It followed them to the hotel and helped to eat their excellent luncheon. The waiters made no objection; later they were to learn that the staff of that hotel objected to very little. They returned to Barcelona by train and were escorted to the station by the dog. They were afraid it would try to board the train, but it trotted away as if it was used to seeing friends off.

It was still light when they returned to the flat and Flora went to open the windows and, looking onto the waste of roofs, said: "I shall be so happy to exchange this view for one of the sea. Do come and look. They really have put the roof on that new block of flats. They have started on the balustrade and they've hung a flag."

TWELVE

WHEN LEO HAD given their present landlord a month's notice Flora felt that they really were leaving the flat and if the portero appeared at inconvenient times to show prospective tenants over it she received them as if they were long-lost friends—praised everything and never mentioned the appalling shortage of water, the almost unusable stove or the electric water-heater that hardly ever functioned. She wanted to make sure the flat was definitely let so that whatever happened they would have to move out at the end of the month. She had already met their new landlady, Señora Isabela, and had thought her charming. She was a widow in early middle age who owned a hairdressing establishment in Barcelona. She had bought the seaside property as a little investment and as a place to live in when she retired. She was a very pretty woman, with a plump pink-and-white face and hair the colour of crocuses. Later they were to discover that the colour of the hair changed every few weeks; but it always looked delightful. Her shape, her movements, her happy smile—everything about her appearance was very satisfying. She shared the home of her dead husband's family and glittered in it like a glow-worm in dusty ivy. It was a sombre sort of place with heavy Victorian furniture and dark-red walls hung with paintings of mountains and animals attacking each other; to add to the gloom, the shutters were tightly closed. There was an old mother-in-law who sat snarling in a rocking chair, usually knitting

something grey, and an elderly sister-in-law dressed in mourning clothes. Her back was straight and narrow and her lips disapproving. She used to carry a dampened duster in her long yellow hands and every now and then attacked the large leaves of grey-green plants that grew in pots with it. On their first visit to Señora Isabela's they had sat in the semi-darkness sipping Calisay from tiny glasses and nibbling letter biscuits and squares of cheese on sticks. Their hostess beamed on them and made spritely conversation; her sister-in-law drank 'maté' tea and the only time she spoke was when she put her hand to her side and complained of her liver. The old mother just went on rocking, knitting and snarling. Isabela had asked them how they liked the spotted curtains and bed covers and they told her how 'Qué mono' they thought they were. Then there had been the difficulty of saying that they did not like the light fittings, of which she appeared to be very proud, calling them 'functional'. Eventually Leo said that they already owned a lot of electrical fittings, also rather a lot of personal things, ornaments and pictures, so would she mind taking hers away. They felt like monsters when they saw the disappointed expression on her face. "Don't you like the flowers? I painted the pots myself. And the plastic cacti, don't you care for those either?" Flora with a sinking heart assured her that she did; it was just that there were so many things hanging on the walls. But they would love to keep the cacti. They had nothing similar in England. They liked the plates, too, but had so many themselves. The functional table, why surely they wanted to keep that? and the lamb? She had been so happy choosing and making things for the 'casita', but perhaps she could use the things they did not need for her shop. What a pity they already had so much towards a home! Yes, it was a pity when she had made the house look so attractive. They were longing to move into it. The hot water system? Oh, yes, there was hot water. Hadn't they noticed

the taps? And so it went on. Leo signed the agreement and paid a year's rent in advance, which he was fortunately able to do as he had recently received money from England. Then they departed.

It had been settled that they were to move on the first of June and Flora immediately arranged to have wooden boxes made to take their linen, blankets, china and books. She must have made a mistake in her measuring, not being used to metres, and when the boxes arrived they were far larger than she had expected, almost the size of wardrobes, but the wood they were made of was so thin that they were not capable of taking much weight. Every time she looked at them or, even more frequently, bumped into them, she felt ashamed of her incompetence. She decided that she would be able to use them if they were only half-filled, and they certainly had not enough belongings to fill them completely.

She went with Leo to an inexpensive-looking furniture shop she had discovered by Provenza market. They specialized in pine-wood furniture which they made on the premises and the designs were mostly simple and quite attractive, the chairs in particular. They ordered some low, rush-seated chairs, a bookcase and two chests-of-drawers. Isabela had promised them a garden table and chairs. The shop agreed to send the furniture by train to Tres Torres, so all they would have to move would be their trunks and Flora's deplorable boxes. The portero said he would find a man to do the moving, someone *‘mas barato’*, so they left it to him. He had become very interested in the move, scorning Flora's boxes, saying he could have got better and cheaper ones himself and suggesting which of their belongings could be left in the flat because they were not worth the expense of moving. His wife-- or was it his mother? they had never liked to ask-- tried to sell Flora hideous crocheted mats she had made. At first Flora thought she was offering them as a gift and, embarrassed, said how pretty she

thought they were; then it turned out they were fifty pesetas each and she had to make it clear that, although they were beautiful, English people did not use such things.

A postcard arrived from John, saying: "I have seen Meg several times. Writing soon."

"Well, I suppose that's good news, but it does not tell us much," Flora said, as she studied a photograph of Guildford High Street. "They must take photographs for postcards on Sundays because they always look so dreary, as if there was going to be a funeral any minute. The blinds are all down in this one. What on earth is John doing in Guildford anyway?" Leo, who was still doing sums connected with the move, looked up to say: "I think Meg's father lives there. Don't talk for a minute; I'm trying to work out how long our English money will last. I think it's going to be all right now I'm earning more." Flora put the card down and resumed her packing. They were not moving for a fortnight and most of the things would have to be taken out again, but she spent several hours a day at it.

When Leo had finished his calculations he left the flat to give a lesson and, when Flora heard the front-door bell ring a few minutes later, she thought he had returned for one of his books. "He must have forgotten his keys again," she muttered, as she pushed her way past the packing-cases to reach the door. She brushed her hair back with one hand as she opened it; then stood there transfixed.

"Holá, I thought I'd see how you were getting on," Parker said as he walked past her. "Did you get my flowers? What's the matter with you? Are you struck dumb or something?" Flora slowly shut the door as she said: "No, not dumb, only surprised."

Parker strode towards the sitting-room. "Good God! What's all this wood about the place? Taking up carpentry? Someone's made a pretty bad job of those boxes--not strong

enough to take anything except feathers. Did you make them yourself?" He sat on one of the arm-chairs and looked at Flora impatiently. "Do sit down and stop looking like Hamlet's mother." She seated herself stiffly on the arm of the other upholstered chair and untied a small apron she had been wearing, flinging it under the sofa. "We are moving. That's why all those boxes are all over the flat. And I didn't make them myself; they were made by a carpenter. I like that sort of packing-case, so flimsy and elegant. Just right for packing eiderdowns."

"You must have quite a lot of eiderdowns."

"Yes, I collect them." Flora found she was rather enjoying herself and settled more comfortably in her chair.

Parker smiled. Offering her a cigarette, he said: "That's better. You needn't think I'm going to rape you. This is a purely friendly visit. As you won't tell me your news, I'll tell you mine. I expect you already know about my abduction of Meg. Lord! The remorse that poor girl went through! It was past belief. But I found it very depressing. Of course I'd never have started anything if I knew she was going to feel like that. She seemed such a sensible sort of girl and so lovely—that white skin contrasting with the jet-black hair, her face and figure; it was perfect. She was, and of course is, such a lovely thing, but it wasn't worth it. I can only hope she goes back to John. Are they together again, do you know?"

"Actually John is in England now. I think it is going to be all right eventually. I've only had one post-card from him since he left." She paused for a moment; then with an effort she brought out: "I don't know what their plans are but, if they do return here, you will leave them alone? Please do."

"Of course I'll leave them alone. I've no intention of crossing their paths again if I can avoid it. You can't think what it was like in Seville after the first two days. Anyway, my wife's coming out here. We may even consider remarrying.

I don't know. There's been some trouble. I hadn't heard from her for almost two years and then this letter came." The jaunty look left Parker and he became sort of crumpled. "It's the elder boy, he was burnt to death. The house set on fire and it was the top flat they were living in. They managed to get the younger out unhurt, but Gerald must have been suffocated by the smoke—at least, I hope so. They found him huddled up just by the door. My wife's arm was badly burnt and she's still in hospital; but she'll be coming out with the little one in about ten days' time and we'll see how we get on together. You know, I was fond of those boys, Gerald in particular. I'd have liked to have had one of them out here with me, but she wouldn't agree and I can't really blame her. Poor thing!"

They sat without speaking for some time. Then Parker jumped up. "You look rather sweet with your hair all untidy and that comic little apron you were wearing. I suppose you don't want to kiss me goodbye." Flora made it quite clear that she did not wish to do so; so they shook hands on parting and Parker said: "I hope in time you will think of me as a friend," and Flora, studying him carefully, noticed that his blue jeans did not appear quite so bright as formally, there was a whitish cotton film over them, the expression in his doll-like eyes was different, his rather perky nose was slightly pinched and there was a worn appearance about him. 'He looks like something that has had rough treatment in the laundry,' Flora thought as she left her hand in his for a moment and said: "Do you know, that may happen." They smiled at each other and she closed the door, listening to hear the lift ascend in answer to his ring. Then she heard the doors crash and the grinding and bumping of the lift descending and taking Parker out of her life for ever.

She returned to her packing.

THIRTEEN

THE MOVE TOOK place on the first of June, which happened to be an extremely wet and gusty day. The van supplied by the porterto materialized as an open coal lorry and it arrived an hour early, which caused confusion because Flora was expecting it to arrive at least an hour late. Leo was still at his office when the coalman and portero started hustling trunks and boxes into the lift. The lids of the boxes had not been nailed down and, when Flora explained that she had no nails, the men pulled long faces because the boxes were so large that they had to be up-ended to fit into the lift. There were ominous crashes and bangs as her carefully packed china and cooking utensils tipped out. Impatient housewives kept ringing bells and shouting up the shaft because Flora's move was monopolizing the lift and, when Leo returned, he had to walk up the stairs and then be told that there was no time for luncheon. They would have to leave immediately to meet the lorry in Tres Torres.

On looking at a timetable, they discovered they had just missed a train and there would not be another until the afternoon; as the men appeared to be in such a tremendous hurry, they took a taxi to Tres Torres, saying to each other from time to time: "Well, we don't move often, so the expense is justified."

It was still raining determinedly when they collected the key from the builder. When they splashed up the steps and

opened the door of their new home, a strong smell of must met them and made the fact that they had missed their luncheon seem even more depressing. They pulled up the shutter of the living-room window and felt a little better. All the plastic horrors had disappeared and the large, simply furnished room looked very attractive. "I'll be able to hang my Chinese blue plate here," Flora said cheerfully; but Leo was hungry and worried about the damp. It certainly was damp. The shutters in the other rooms had become warped and only moved a few inches, the mattresses were soggy and the frilly muslin counterpanes hung limply. Everything they touched felt clammy. They inspected the rusty kitchen stove and wished they had some fuel to burn in it. "We should have asked the builder's wife to order us some coal," Flora said sadly. "We will have to use our electric ring until we have coal." Leo mournfully remarked: "That's just what's worrying me: the light doesn't work." Flora dejectedly flicked the electric switch up and down. "There's a little river running in through the crack at the bottom of the door. Let's sit in the other room, it's not quite so depressing."

They lit cigarettes and waited for the coal cart. Rain beat against the windows and splashed on the terrace and they listened to unaccustomed sounds. They did not talk, just waited and listened. When Leo had smoked his third and last cigarette he glanced at his wife's huddled form and asked: "Exactly what was it you objected to so strongly in the Barcelona flat?" She did not reply immediately; then dreamily remarked: "I'm watching the raindrops travelling along the telephone wires; they move so fast;" then, crossly: "You know I hated the flat, so why go on about it?" She left the room and wandered round the house, examining the furniture, opening the windows, turning on taps. Some of the taps did not work and the window shutters had warped with damp. She returned to the sitting-room, where

Leo sat wrapped in his wet raincoat coughing from time to time. She said: "There's absolutely nowhere to keep food; and we will have to get an ice-box." Leo slowly turned his eye; away from the dripping window and said in a hollow voice: "I don't think we will need one."

The unaccustomed sounds outside suddenly altered; the iron gate groaned as it opened; they heard men's voices speaking Catalan, heavy footsteps on the terrace, a sharp knock at the door. The whole atmosphere changed. Flora and Leo rushed to the door, greeting the coalman and his son as if they were their saviours. The rain was forgotten as Flora directed where furniture and boxes were to be placed. Leo darted about the terrace offering the men his help, laughing with them as they hauled the heavier boxes over the terrace wall with ropes. He shouted to Flora: "The case with the books is still dry, they won't be damaged at all." In spite of the weather people had collected round the villa's steps, watching the 'extranjeros' moving house. There was little to see except packing-cases, trunks and simple furniture—no hens, rolls of wire, pigeon-cotes, vast beds or wardrobes; but it gave them endless entertainment. Before the men went Flora got them to break up two of the wooden cases and, with the help of the coalman's son, lit the kitchen stove with the rather damp wood. She made coffee, which they all drank as they dried round its warmth, and, when the men had left, they had a picnic meal sitting in the kitchen. After they had eaten, they washed the muddy kitchen floor, then dragged the mattresses from the bedroom and arranged them round the stove to air. Then Leo went off to pay a visit to the builder to inquire why there was no electricity. Flora splashed down the hill behind him to find the nearest shops. She soon came to a small square, but at first she could only see what appeared to be bars; there did not appear to be any 'colmados' or food shops of any description except for a small 'pasteleria'. Then

she noticed that the bars also sold provisions. Later she was to discover the joy of shopping in a bar that only closed in the dead of night. A pale, gingerish-coloured man served her. He had the face of a blond bull with sentimental eyes and a cluster of curls on his massive forehead. He was friendly and, when she told him about her lack of coal, offered to order her some by telephone. He also sold her a bag of charcoal to use in the meantime.

When she returned she found Leo unpacking his clothes and hanging them in the only wardrobe. He had discarded his raincoat and was making whistling noises through his teeth; Flora hoped it was *The Maid of the Mountains* which was always a good sign. "He's taking more than half of the wardrobe; I'll say nothing about it for the moment now he seems to be settling down." He asked her quite cheerfully if she had remembered to buy candles and, when she replied that she had, told her they would have to wait until a man arrived from Barcelona to connect the electricity—it might take days. He had only spoken to the builder's wife and she had appeared annoyed when he had mentioned that there was no hot water, but said she would speak to her husband about it.

"Perhaps it will come on suddenly," Flora said hopefully. "The stove hasn't been burning long."

When the evening came they sat on their new chairs before a blazing fire in the living-room. Candles were burning on the mantelpiece and the place was beginning to look quite homelike. They drank Tio Pepe and nibbled olives and salted almonds, and there was a faint, but encouraging, smell of cooking coming from the kitchen. "These boxes were a very good buy really," Flora observed as she heaped more wood on the fire. "It is the first time we have sat by a fire together since we left England. All we need now is a dog and a cat."

Leo smiled. "Yes, we must get a dog, but not until we are

straight here. Darling, I'm sorry I was so bad-tempered earlier on; but it all seemed so hopeless and I couldn't help regretting that snug little flat in Barcelona. I know you disliked it, but I always found it convenient and warm. Of course, I wasn't there all day; it was different for you." He leant forward and stroked his wife's floss-like hair. "I love your hair; it reminds me of tinsel, Christmas trees and fairy dolls. I do hope you are going to be happy here."

"Don't worry, I know I'm going to be wonderfully happy; for one thing there is so much to do. Do you know, I was so bored and depressed in that beastly flat I'd sometimes sit on the bed for hours trying to live through a London day in my memory, trying to remember every little detail—the crack in the tile just above the wash-basin, the smell of the broom-cupboard, how you looked when you went off to your office, the milkman's face, those plaster birds moulded into the arch in the hall, the stars on our bedroom ceiling, the names on the lavatory pans--The Brompton and The Jap. They don't have names here, do they? Oh, Leo, I'm going to be such a good wife now we have got something more like a home to live in. You'll be surprised"

Leo drew her to him, saying against her cheek: "You have always been a good wife; I don't want you to be any different. Anything that has happened has been my fault for being such an old stick, so un-understanding. You must never think you have been a bad wife."

Flora laughed shakily. "Well, you mustn't say you've been a bad husband."

Their first day at Tres Torres was a shimmering one, shimmering with sun and sea and sand; and dark pine trees and the gravel pit behind the house and all this blazing light in front. They swam in the sea, which was colder than they expected, and dried on the burning sand, where Catalans sat under coloured umbrellas in sleek groups, smelling of sun-tan

lotions. They returned to the house and the must and damp had gone. When Flora had struggled with the warped windows and doors earlier in the morning, she had eventually managed to open them wide and had imagined she could see the damp smells creeping out of the house like sleepy bats and spiders. They ate a simple meal on the terrace, the sun burning down on melting butter and drying bread, tomatoes and lettuce withering up on their plates.

Leo, who was feeling the heat, murmured from under his hat: "I think perhaps another day we'll eat in the house."

"As you like, darling. We have all the summer before us." And to Flora it seemed that the summer would last for ever.

During the afternoon Señora Isabela came tripping across the terrace followed by a taxi-driver carrying a garden table, her pretty milkmaid's face all smiles and her hands in their white-lace gloves lifted towards the sun. She cried out how glad she was that the sun was shining for them and she smiled approvingly at the bathing things hanging over the terrace wall. They felt grateful to her, as if she were renting them the weather as well as the house. While they were admiring the garden table, which was white and rotund, the taxi-driver appeared again with a many-coloured sunshade. The sunshade fitted into a hole in the centre of the table. When it had been erected, there was a great gaudy mushroom growing from their terrace. "I hope people won't think we sell Coca-Cola," Flora whispered. The taxi-driver reappeared with yellow wooden objects hanging from his arm. When he opened them up, they were chairs. He staggered up the steps four more times carrying large flower-pots bursting with scarlet and pink geraniums, then, completely exhausted, he staggered down the steps for the last time and went to sleep in the back of his taxi. Señora Isabela clattered round the house on her stiletto-heeled shoes, pursing her lips at the damp-distorted woodwork, expressing astonishment at the non-existent hot-

water system, looking rather forlornly at the nails on the walls that had once held butterflies and swallows. She hurried away to fetch the builder and a carpenter, and to her tenants' surprise returned a quarter of an hour later with both in tow. The builder shook his heavy head over the lack of hot water and said he had installed hot taps and thought that sufficient; it was up to whoever bought the house to do whatever they considered best about supplying hot water. He suggested an electric geyser, which Isabela agreed to pay for. Meanwhile the carpenter was planing doors and window frames, and curls of golden shavings were gently moving across the pink floors.

When the men had gone, Flora made tea on a spirit stove and Isabela drank her first cup of English-made tea. She drank it very slowly and daintily ate her cake from the end of her knife, not liking to use her fingers. Flora, to Leo's astonishment, tried to imitate her, without much success. As they sat over their tea, Isabela amused them with an account of her only other experience of tea-drinking. She had been in the company of three South American priests and their idea of tea was to place some tea leaves in a large bowl, pour hot water over them, then sit round the steaming bowl with their friends and suck up the liquid through slender tubes or straws.

Within a week the electricity was connected and hot water ran from the taps; an ice-box was purchased and a man with a motor-tricycle left ice on their doorstep every morning. Another man with a cart collected rubbish; stray cats sat round the back door waiting for scraps. Leo did a suburban sprint to the station five mornings a week and Flora's skin had turned a golden brown. By now she knew that fresh vegetables were sold under a certain umbrella pine on fine mornings; that to buy meat or fish necessitated a kilometre walk inland; and that food was more expensive than it had been in the city. Leo insisted that she employ a maid to do the laundry

work and wash the floors, and on the bar's recommendation she engaged an elderly woman with a bent back and gentle ways. She had the great advantage of having a quiet voice, very rare in a Spanish maid, and Flora forgave her her only vice, which consisted of pouring bottles of bleach over the laundry and rotting their clothes. When Flora refused to buy it, she provided her own. The only time she heard her complain bitterly about the rise in prices was when this 'lejia' went up a peseta a bottle.

In spite of the luxury of a servant to do the heavy work Flora's time appeared to be fully occupied. The shopping took much longer than it used to in Barcelona. She had to cover a considerable distance to complete her purchases and found the assistants behind the counters pleasant, but unbearably slow-talking, smiling, flashing metal teeth, slowly cutting pieces of paper, wrapping and smiling. Flora seemed to be the only customer who found this tedious. There was great rivalry between the 'bar-colmados' and, if Flora already had shopping in her basket that she had purchased across the little square, the blond bull and his mother would crossly inquire: "Where did you get that—atross the road?" and pull faces as if the contents of Flora's basket were contaminated. She also managed to spend an inordinate amount of time tending her flowers on the terrace. Already she had established quite a colony of flower-pots and boxes, filled with earth which she had carried from the woods behind the house. Marguerites, carnations, petunias and the inevitable geraniums had all been bought in flower and were thriving in spite of being transplanted. English seeds, supplied by her sisters, were being coaxed in shady boxes, and two young orange trees with glossy leaves were growing in tubs. On warm days she liked to spend an hour or two on the beach swimming and sun-bathing and reading novels from the British Institute, which became engrained with fine sand,

sometimes the cloth covers coming into contact with the sea. Any book she read on the beach looked a year older by the time she returned it to the library.

As the weather grew warmer, more and more villas became inhabited, more coloured sunshades appeared in gardens and on the beach, and more and more radios played favourite tunes and more women's voices shouted in Catalan what sounded like 'Vina, vina aqui' to their children. At night coloured lights decorated terraces and gardens, and 'roc-an-rol' and favourite tunes became even louder. On Sundays large family parties streamed out of the station from an early hour, so overloaded with bundles and suitcases that they looked like refugees. When they reached the beach they often built themselves huts from bamboo and newspaper, and they seemed to spend most of the day cooking and eating huge meals, even killing and plucking chickens on the beach.

On Saturday afternoons Isabela came to Flora for an English lesson and conversation, and in return Flora had Spanish conversation. The lessons were not taken very seriously, but they both managed to learn a little and, if Leo happened to be present, Isabela learnt more. She was not interested in English grammar, but wanted to learn useful sentences, such as "Would you like a permanent wave?" or "I can tint your hair blond, red, black, or any colour you wish", and "We are very busy today. Will you please wait five minutes?" and, for some reason, "Don't mention it". She was very fond of the last phrase which she always telescoped into one word. She often arrived with gifts of flowers or sweet cakes, and in return Flora entertained her with bottled beer or Cinzano with soda; she preferred these drinks to tea.

One evening, when they had been living in Tres Torres for about a fortnight, Leo returned with a wooden box with a small round hole at each end. Out of one of the holes a long brown arm appeared, then Flora heard a familiar yowl. She

seized the box from Leo and, opening the sliding lid, took the Siamese kitten in her arms. "Oh, I've wanted one ever since we came to Spain!" she said happily as the kitten climbed onto her shoulder, completely at home. "It's got a double kink in its tail, Leo. That means it's a prince or princess." Leo admitted he had no idea of the kitten's sex and added, almost apologetically: "I saw it in the Ramblas and felt sorry for it. You see, it was living in a bird cage and the wind was ruffling its fur. I hope it will be all right; the man assured me it was a 'señor' but it does not look like one to me." Flora, examining it closely, remarked: "I never believe a cat is a tom until it doesn't have kittens. They nearly always turn out to be shes."

She put the kitten on the floor and, with a sudden leap, it landed on a chair and ran up the high back and hung there for a few seconds; and then the chair crashed onto the ground and the kitten ran up another and leapt to the mantelpiece. Leo, looking rather disconcerted, said: "Oh dear, it appears to be rather wild. Was our other cat like this?" Flora, carefully disentangling the kitten from a vase of flowers, held it in her arms. "Ours was older than this one. I think it's left its mother too soon. Poor little thing, perhaps it's hungry."

They called the kitten Sparrow. It was an affectionate and intelligent little thing, but very mobile and mischievous. It had a passion for gnawing at the electric wiring and Flora became embarrassed when she had to ask the electrician to pay such frequent visits to repair the damage. It yowled rather a lot, too, and it was impossible to have it in the room while a meal was in progress because it kept making flying leaps at the table to lick the butter or anything else that attracted it. After it had sent Leo's glass of wine spinning from the table and upset a plate of fish in his lap, it was banished from the dining-room and, as they heard it mewling and yowling

outside the door, Leo remarked that animals were a form of self-imposed martyrdom, but the first few weeks were usually the worst. Nevertheless, when the kitten disappeared one afternoon, Leo spent several hours in the woods above the gravel pit hunting for it. It was eventually found rolled up asleep in his sock-drawer, looking very like a woolly sock itself.

Towards the end of June Flora received a letter from Meg, just saying that she and John had returned to Barcelona and were living in their old flat in Calle de Tallers. They had been surprised to hear from the portero that Flora and Leo had already moved and wondered if it would be convenient to visit them; a Sunday or public holiday would be best. Flora immediately wrote back to invite them to spend the fiesta of San Juan at Tres Torres, adding: "It may be awful here by then. The place is getting very crowded."

This was almost an understatement. On Sundays half the inhabitants of Barcelona seemed to belch from the station from six in the morning and, as the day went on, the other half arrived in cars and on Vespas; sometimes as many as a family of five on one motor-scooter if it had a side-car. The camping sites on the side of the main road had all filled up with orange and yellow tents, cars and flapping laundry. The hotels appeared to be filled with people of most nations, French and German predominating. The thing that surprised Flora was the way the Catalans dressed on the beach. She had not expected to see such a quantity of flesh slowly roasting in the sun. Many of the women wore the briefest of bikinis, but fortunately not the fat ones. The fat men were not so modest. They stood with folded arms striking attitudes, looking rather like eastern potentates as they watched the pretty girls through their dark glasses, their huge stomachs glistening with oil, and often tiny leopard-marked bikinis round their loins. Their plump wives lay with closed eyes under their

coloured umbrellas listening to their portable radios, coming out of their coma every now and then to rub more sun-tan oil on their fine skins and adjust their glossy hair.

Sometimes on Sunday Flora and Leo would have luncheon at the hotel where they had eaten on their first visit. The food was good and the place had a sort of fascination for them. The clientele consisted almost entirely of wealthy Catalans — young men accompanied by very lovely girls, often with their hair tinted a silvery blond and golden sandals on their carefully-manicured feet; sleek husbands and wives; and sometimes a well-behaved child or two dressed in freshly-laundered white, the little girls carefully lifting their starched skirts before sitting down. Some of the young women wore such brief shorts that the waiters had to bring them cushions to prevent their thighs becoming marked by the wicker-seated chairs. There were really beautiful girls who appeared to be staying alone in the hotel for the summer, only occasionally receiving visits from their rich, sometimes middle-aged admirers.

These girls never spoke to the other visitors and their only companions were the children of the kitchen staff. Not liking to sit in the dining-room alone, they always had a little boy to share their table and appeared to enjoy his company, often playing simple card games and reading comic papers to him for hours, the boy returning to the kitchen when the gentleman friend appeared. While meals were being served a gramophone played eating-music. There were about ten different records, each more silly than the last, and occasionally at home. Flora would find herself humming one at mealtimes. The service at these Sunday luncheons was very leisurely, although Leo tried to hurry their waiter in the hope of missing the miserable little busker-actor who always appeared while they were having their coffee. He wore a straw hat at an angle and a light suit, smoked a cigar and carried a cane. His face was thin and yellow and dominated by his large nose. His wretched,

yet jaunty act consisted of walking up and down and shouting in a confidential manner, waving his stick and sometimes playing a few notes on a mouth organ and imitating bird sounds, all punctuated by many "Señores y Señoras". There was something so conceitedly boring about his turn that it made Flora and Leo feel revolted, even more so when he came to their table fawning for money, holding out his greasy straw hat and rolling his eyes in a pitiful way. Sometimes the waiters would half-heartedly try to send him away, but he insisted that the señoras and señores would be disappointed if they didn't see his act. Flora tried to pity him but found it difficult. She preferred the beggars who sometimes pushed a worn hand through the hedge of the outdoor dining-room and cried for pesetas.

Although her days were fully occupied, Flora still spasmodically wrote in her diary. She would sit on her terrace under the great, blooming sunshade, scribbling down her impressions of life in Tres Torres.

I went bathing twice today, in the morning and afternoon. The sea was like the Atlantic, great rollers coming in. Before they broke they were bright green with the sun streaming through, so clear that occasionally, just for a moment, I saw a large fish rolled in the waves. A man on the beach had eight children, mostly long-haired girls, but there were a few bullet-headed little boys. He buried them in the sand, but left their heads sticking out and then fed them with ice-cream. There was a large party of monks playing football. When they went into the sea to bathe they left their hoods and habits lying on the sand and it seemed strange to see them there.

Most of the señoras here keep birds in tiny cages, but at least they don't keep them down a dark lift-shaft as they did in Barcelona. The Spanish for cage is 'jaula' or

‘prisión’. I suppose we all live in cages, sometimes we are forced into them, but usually we make our own.

She would stop her writing every now and then to make paper balls to throw to the kitten or to watch the happenings in the little square below. Of the two ‘bar-colmados’, one was very clean and modern and the other dirty behind its bead curtains. The owners had not spoken to each other for over ten years. There was the tobacconist’s shop with the fat old man always sitting outside with his mangy black-and-white dog curled up round his feet. The shop that sold sweets and postcards was kept by a girl of eleven with long pigtailed and long legs. People seldom entered the shop, but all her young friends collected round the door reading papers like *Sissi* to each other or practising their dance steps. Flora disliked this young shopkeeper because she would giggle about her as she passed, even pointing her out to her friends as the mad foreigner, and following her into shops to hear her stumbling Spanish. Foreigners seldom came to that part of Tres Torres; they preferred the hotels and the beach where the pine trees grew.

FOURTEEN

"WHAT ARE YOU doing, Leo, with all those bits of paper and visiting cards?"

"I'm going through my list of friends. I adjust it from time to time."

"Do you mean you cross people off?" Flora asked in an awed voice as she sat down beside Leo to study the list. "Who's Robin Porclerk and Albert J. Burton. They sound harmless, inoffensive sort of men; you won't cross them off, will you?"

"Well, I won't actually cross them off: I've rather lost touch, but might look them up if we ever return to London."

"Here's someone crossed off in red ink—Jumbo Clarke. I seem to remember that name."

"Oh, yes, he's that Australian artist who got so drunk at our farewell party. I crossed him off the next day."

"There's someone scratched off very blackly here, almost at the end of the list. Oh, I see, it's Parker." Flora put down the list of friends and looked out of the window at the square of brilliant sky; then she rested her hand on Leo's shoulder and said in a low voice: "I hope you never cross me off." He put his hand over hers, looked at her intently, then said: "Whatever you did, I'd never cross you off. I can't imagine living without you; I'd become all dehydrated and crumble away."

Leo returned to his list and Flora to the kitchen, where

Teresa the maid was plucking a chicken at the open door, feathers flying like snow. It was the eve of San Juan and Meg and John were expected for the fiesta. It would be the first time they had seen the Wyndhams since the disastrous visit to Seville, and Flora felt a little uneasy about the meeting. She wanted to hear about their reunion, but dreaded any mention of Parker. 'He must have told her about me, but I don't want to talk about it. I don't even want to think about it more than I can help. I hope she feels the same.' Her thoughts were disturbed by the sight of the skinny little yellow-skinned bird Teresa was displaying. With some aversion she took it from her and, carrying it by the legs, she ran to Leo crying: "Look at all that's left of the chicken now the old woman has plucked it. As soon as a Spanish chicken takes its feathers off that is all that's left, and it cost nearly a hundred pesetas. It will never do for four people—and John has such a healthy appetite."

Leo raised his eyes to the sad little bird, immediately looked away and suggested she cooked it with rice. "Make a sort of 'paella', you do them so well." Then: "Oh, God, the kitten's making a mess in the fireplace!"

"I'll clear it up in a minute, but don't fuss. Pepys was always doing it in the chimney. I read his diary once—but it may have been someone else's. . . ."

"Things were different in Pepy's days. Do put it outside." Sparrow was put on the terrace and Flora returned to the kitchen to cook her 'paella'. She had a battle with the maid, who wanted to cook it herself, and she was also troubled by a small boy who fell over the back-yard wall. The house next door was now occupied by a family with three boys, and the boys spent a considerable time each day watching Flora and shouting to their mother a report of her doings. Sometimes they presented her with short-stemmed flowers or scraps for the cat and, although they were a pest, she couldn't find it in

her heart to dislike them. She promptly returned the shower of balls, socks and sandals that somehow found their way into her yard and she sometimes threw sugared animals over the wall. Leo called it 'Danegeld.'

Later in the morning she went to the bars in search of 'gambas'. She passed housewives gossiping, leaning on their brooms so heavily that they resembled mops. They often spent an hour or two like that each day, repeating the same remarks over and over again, smiling and nodding towards each other and exclaiming, "¡Qué lastima! Si, si, si." Or "¡Claro!" from time to time. The builder's wife, an energetic woman, not liking to stand idle, had swept so much in front of her husband's office that a great dip had come in the road. Family parties were struggling up the hill weighted down with baskets, suitcases and rockets, the sticks protruding from the paper. The children ran ahead to be greeted by waiting relations and friends. When she reached the square, coloured streamers were draped across it and music was relayed from every bar; but as each was playing something different the effect was not exactly pleasing. People were already sitting outside the bars drinking and eating their own food from paper packages. Others were standing by a mobile stall where a considerable amount of frying was going on; they were eating stuff that looked like fried rope - golden tubes of it. Flora brought bottled mussels, fresh 'gambas' and crusty warm bread, pulling pieces off the loaf to eat as she went home.

She spent the rest of the morning working happily in the kitchen. The maid had gone home and no more small boys fell over the wall. When Leo came into the kitchen to rinse some wine bottles in the sink she showed him her rich-looking 'paella' with pride. "There's a lemon meringue pie in the oven, but I've made a fruit salad as well because I know you prefer it." She opened the oven slightly so that Leo could see the pie in all its glory. He vaguely glanced inside and said it

looked very appetizing and, turning away from the heat, asked for a basket for the wine bottles. "Now stop admiring your cooking and tell me if there is anything else you want?" adding: "Nothing very bulky, though."

She carefully closed the oven door and said thoughtfully: "Well, I'd like some green olives. We've only got black ones and they taste of church. Oh, and you might look out for Meg and John; they may not have understood my instructions on how to get here."

"You didn't give them one of your little maps, did you?"

"Well, yes, I did. It was a much better one than usual, only I may not have made it clear how many turnings there were on the left."

"In that case I'd better go to the station. I know those little maps of yours," Leo said dryly as he left the kitchen.

When Leo left, Flora returned to the stove and took the lemon meringue pie out of the oven with a sigh of relief; it had only slightly browned and looked like an advertisement in an American magazine. She took a quick shower and dressed herself in fresh clothes beautifully ironed by Teresa; then went onto the terrace to put up the garish sunshade and arrange drinks and 'tapas'. She rescued a lizard from the kitten and threw a plastic trumpet and a small pair of trousers onto the next-door terrace, and was battling with the collapsible chairs when Leo returned with Meg and John.

There they were in the blazing light looking the perfect young married people, radiant and handsome. She hurried towards them and threw her arms round Meg crying: "Oh, it's so lovely to see you again! I'd forgotten how beautiful you are." Then, laughing: "And John is looking awfully handsome, too." The sense of strain that she had expected was not there; it was just as it had been before Meg's disappearance. When the view, the house and the kitten had

been admired, they sat on the terrace eating the 'tapas' and exchanging news. John had decided to give up his share of the studio and was obtaining work in an advertising studio in Madrid through Eduardo. "He's a Madrileño, and most of his friends are in Madrid. He's given me masses of introductions and has been so helpful in all kinds of ways, even insisting on paying me so much a month for my share of the studio. He's given up the old one and is moving to Calle Santa Ana because it is more central; you remember that street on the left, at the top of the Ramblas."

"Yes, that's the street they decorated so beautifully last Christmas. There were paper angels that danced in the wind. But it is sad that you are leaving Barcelona and there will be no more 'Atico Artists'," Flora said regretfully.

Leo hastily changed the subject and asked where they intended to live in Madrid.

They ate in the house behind closed shutters. The heat had become so intense that even Flora was grateful for the darkened room. Sparrow was so excited by the smell of fish combined with chicken that she had to be shut in the spare room to amuse herself with the chicken's head, and every now and then there would be an indignant yowl or a sinister crash. John teased Flora: "You've been thoroughly had over that cat. It certainly isn't a prince or even a princess. That peculiar tail is the result of someone treading on it, most likely dancing a 'sardana' on it, if you ask me."

"But I don't ask you. I know that double kink means something special. And we're glad it's a she. You are going to have one of its first kittens. In fact I may send the whole litter to Madrid."

In spite of the ominous background noises and John's teasing it was a happy meal. John and Meg were glowing and Leo was in one of his rare gay moods, those which Flora thought of as 'London moods', although they were almost

as rare in London as in Spain. She rushed backwards and forwards between the kitchen and dining-room, happy and surprised that her cooking had turned out so well.

While they were drinking their coffee and liqueur brandy, there was a knock on the glass window of the front door. Flora exclaimed: "I told Teresa to let herself in, but I expect she's shy. I hope she doesn't run away when she sees so many dirty dishes." She went into the hall just as another tapping of glass began. Rather impatiently she opened the door without looking through the glass and, to her surprise, found herself face to face with her old enemy the portero, wearing a white cotton yachting cap, sun-glasses, a soiled nylon shirt, and an imitation gold watch almost the size of a grandfather clock. "¿Mister, Mister?" he inquired and Flora, losing her head, took him into the living-room, regretting it as soon as she saw Leo's dismayed and startled expression. The portero advanced towards Leo with his hand outstretched and there was a great hand-shaking all round; then he produced a crumpled letter. He said he thought it might be important, so he'd brought it to Leo personally. It proved to be a routine letter from the bank. Of course he had to be offered coffee and brandy and there he sat, leaning at Meg over his long nose, making remarks about the damp patches on the walls and talking about footballers. Flora had the idea of letting Sparrow into the room, hoping it would climb and claw over him; but it took one look and rushed away with its tail held high and brushed out like a squirrel, and they heard it dancing on the stacked china in the kitchen.

The Wyndhams had brought their swimming-things with them and were very keen to bathe. Flora and Leo were feeling sleepy after so much food and drink, but they agreed to accompany their guests to the beach, hoping that the portero might get mislaid on the way. Flora and Meg retired to the bedroom to put their bathing-dresses on under their cotton

frocks. They laughingly agreed that it would be impossible to change on the beach under the portero's eye. "It's almost as if he knew you would be here today," Flora said as she took a green swimming-costume from an overfilled drawer. "I think I'd better wear a one-piece today, the beach will be so crowded. Didn't the portero say something about going to Tibidabo to see the fireworks? Perhaps he won't come to the beach after all."

Meg struggled with her zip. "Heavens! I hope so. He's like some bird of prey that's moulting." She glanced at Flora's golden-brown body. "You are a wonderful colour. You make me look like something that has lived in a cellar. Would you mind if I came here to sunbathe a few times before we go to Madrid?"

"I'd love it if you did. During the week there is hardly anyone on our end of the beach. You can't think how I'm going to miss you both, but you are right to go and I'm glad John has found a job so easily."

Meg pulled her dress over her head and said in a muffled voice through its folds: "You can't be more pleased than I am. I couldn't bear to think I'd ruined his career as well as everything else. But he's never reproached me, or mentioned it's my fault we are leaving." That was the nearest they got to mentioning Parker. It was almost as if he had never existed.

Accompanied by the portero, they walked to the beach and found an almost deserted part at the unfashionable end, where the fishing rods were. There were about twenty rods stuck in the sand in a row; but there was no sign of the fishermen until someone passing became accidentally entangled in one of the lines. Then, as if from nowhere, an indignant man would appear, rolling his eyes reproachfully and muttering in Catalan. Occasionally the rods were re-baited, but otherwise they were left severely alone. To an onlooker it appeared to

be a dull way of fishing, particularly as no one appeared to catch anything except seaweed.

Meg and Flora took off their dresses and lay on the hot sand while Leo and John struggled to undress under large towels. After a few minutes of the glaring heat the portero stood up. Even the rewarding sight of the two young women in their brief costumes was not enough to make him oblivious of the acute discomfort he was suffering. Spending most of his life in a dark, draughty hall, he was unaccustomed to warmth and light, and the sun-glasses gave little protection. He staggered to his feet, saying he must return to Barcelona; and the inevitable handshaking started. Now that he was going they couldn't do enough for him. Meg said she was so glad he had visited Tres Torres on the very day she was there; John pressed American cigarettes on him, and Leo produced a list of trains. As Flora shook hands she asked after his wife in her careful Spanish. Surprised, he answered that the señora knew that he had no wife, and Leo, coming to her rescue, said that Flora was referring to the lady who usually sat with him in the hall. "That señorita is not my wife, she's my 'novia'," he stated with dignity. They asked when the marriage was to take place, but he sighed and shrugged his shoulders saying, "That is a long story." They felt sorry for him as they watched him walking away in his pointed shoes, with his nylon shirt sticking to his humped back. John called: "I hope you enjoy watching the fireworks tonight," but he didn't answer.

When the evening came, they sat on the terrace watching the bonfires flaring on the hills and beaches. For a time it was quite peaceful. Then the rockets started exploding and soaring, and the dogs started howling and barking, and everyone began to dance. Round their bonfires, on their terraces and roofs, they danced and sang and clapped their hands. Some danced sardanas and some flamencos and some did variations

of modern ballroom dancing. They were dancing on the station platform and singing on the roof, and everywhere fireworks were exploding. Towards midnight the four foreigners felt restless on the terrace and wandered through the streets and on the beach. The bonfires were burning low now and fewer rockets illuminated the skies; but the music and dancing continued. They walked in the woods, passing huge family parties obviously intending to spend the night there. A young man showed Meg and Flora a baby owl that had fallen out of a tree when one of their rockets had exploded. It was quite unhurt, but the glow from the bonfire had made it temporarily blind. They passed a white goat tethered to a tree, its owners gravely dancing a sardana in a near-by clearing, singing their own accompaniment. The wood was filled with the smell of broom, honeysuckle and wood-smoke and the comforting sound of crickets. Higher up the hill they saw coloured lights and heard a band playing South American dance music. As they drew nearer they saw that the small hotel, which usually had a slightly sordid air, was now looking quite romantic. It was floodlit in shades of violet and pink, the surrounding trees were lit up with little lights, and the large swimming pool had been emptied and turned into an open-air ballroom with a blue-tiled floor. The fantastically dressed band was playing in the children's paddling pool between two small fountains, and round the sides of the pool people were sitting at tables drinking champagne, the Catalans' favourite fiesta drink. Every now and then someone would let off a volley of fireworks and there was a running accompaniment of champagne-corks popping. They sat at a vacant table and ordered a bottle of champagne, and presently joined in the dancing, which they enjoyed so much that it took two hours and another bottle of champagne before they started to walk home.

They returned through the woods, which had become

almost quiet except for sleepy families vaguely singing round their bonfires, the nightingales and the cry of a strange night-bird which sounded as if it was calling down a metal tube. As they left the woods they passed an almost empty bar with orange-printed walls. Inside there were three young men singing and beating the table and clapping their hands with so much rhythm that the glasses and bottles rattled on the shelves and it seemed as if the whole bar were dancing. There was still a considerable amount of life going on in the little square below the Elliots' house. The 'bar-colmados' were doing a good trade. Two in the morning appeared to be as good a time as any other for chewing fatty golden rope and for children to lick iced lollies. A few loud-speakers blared and crackled distorted music and a certain amount of dancing on roofs and terraces continued through the night.

The following morning Flora and Meg were sleepily laying the table for breakfast when old Teresa arrived, looking rather dishevelled and with pine-needles in her hair. She told them that she had spent the night in the woods with her friends and ended happily: "It is good to know that the fiesta of San Pedro y San Pablo is less than a week away; it will be the same all over again except for the bonfires."

Flora's Diary

August 5th

Now it is August and we have been living in Spain a year. In some ways a terrible year, but it is over and the future looks very bright indeed. Sometimes I'm almost afraid, I feel so content and happy. I'm not homesick and lonely any more and there is such a good understanding between Leo and me. A few months ago we were so far from each other—I can hardly believe those two people were us. Small things like noisy neighbours and living among houses like Japanese dog-kennels hardly matter, be-

cause there is so much to be thankful for—the sun and sea and the beautiful woods and having a home again and, most of all, Leo being in it so much more. I don't really deserve all this, not only because of the way I behaved in Barcelona—and I'm truly sorry about that—but because of the thoughts that come in my mind. I'm not kind enough towards people. When I see the ones who are dirty, ugly and deformed, with huge growths on their faces and dreary, hopeless eyes looking out of the ugliness, I feel they are so awful that they almost deserve to be like that. A kind person wouldn't even mind touching them. The other day in a market-place I saw a shabby old woman slip on a dog's mess and she lay there covered in filth and I saw her poor old head was almost bald. I knew that I should help her to her feet again and try to clean her with my handkerchief, but I couldn't; I just stood there with my hand in front of my mouth. Eventually a young girl came to her aid and then quite a crowd gathered round her and I went away feeling ashamed. It is hard to realize that most likely everyone only has one life and some are so dreadfully handicapped from the beginning. I could have easily been born an Indian beggar living on a bridge or a deformed Chinese exhibited in shows.

This morning I went into Barcelona to exchange books at the British Institute. I think I must be the only member who walks in the garden there. It is beginning to look rather lovely, there is so much Bougainvillea climbing up the walls and someone has planted some lemon trees. Later I had luncheon with Leo in a small family restaurant in Calle Mallorca, called El Caballito Blanco. It is cheap, but the food is excellent and it is our favourite restaurant at the moment. After I left Leo I walked down the Rambla de las Flores to buy some plants for the terrace. Now I do not live in Barcelona, it seems much more attractive to me,

particularly during the summer. Even the rumble of the trams is attractive and I like to see the horses strolling through the streets wearing their straw hats. There are some dear little open trams, with red-and-white canopies, that sometimes go down the Calle Pelayo. They resemble small pleasure-steamers. I don't know why people sitting outside cafés give a city a gay look—even the shoe-shiners hopping round their feet add to it.

Although it is August our beach isn't as crowded as I expected, except on Sunday, and even then it's not unpleasant because people are enjoying themselves. I hardly ever hear a child crying. Hawkers walk up and down selling cheap cotton caps of all sizes and colours, and others sell sun-glasses—the kind that frizzle your eyeballs. There is an ugly little man who comes every summer Sunday, alone except for an enormous homemade kite, larger than himself. It is so difficult to manage that he has to wear a great leather glove on one hand; and he walks up and down the beach weaving in between the people, absorbing the admiration for his kite. Sometimes he sends gold and silver paper messages up the string and everyone watches fascinated as they glitter and slowly climb towards the kite.

I have made several friends on the beach—an American woman with a pointed face and pointed hands and feet and two pointed children—little girls. The husband is quite different, with a square chin and a bit too much white shirt and a pin to keep his brightly striped tie in place. He is slow and ponderous to talk to; but the rest of the family are quick and peck their words. They have a villa near the station filled with wicker furniture, and sometimes we go there for a drink on Sunday mornings. I have also met a Spanish family that I like very much; but they will return to Barcelona at the end of the month—father, mother

and four very mobile small boys. I think they have chicken-pox, but their mother says it is mosquito bites.

We are planning to stay with Meg and John in Madrid when Leo has his holiday in September. They prefer Madrid to Barcelona and find it cheaper; but it wouldn't suit us because there is no sea and it is too cold during the winter.

I am writing on the terrace, facing the woods. The tree trunks are standing out because the sun is just setting. The glow has caught one of the electric pylons so that it appears to be red-hot. It looks so beautiful, glowing against the feathery trees. If pylons were not useful, they would be considered perfect examples of modern art; they are so well-balanced and true. The swallows are swooping overhead, sometimes so low that I imagine I can feel the wind of their wings against my face. The cicadas have ceased their high-pitched whine now and the crickets and frogs are starting up. I would miss those sounds if we returned to England. In fact, there are many things I would miss because I'm beginning to love Spain and at last I'm at home here. The stars are just becoming visible and it is too dark to write any more.

